I Love You Too

By: King Steve

John jumped to 2027 to find Cameron. What he found was a future darker than he'd ever imagined.

Status: complete

Published: 2010-12-17

Updated: 2011-11-03

Words: 351820

Chapters: 39

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Sci-Fi/Adventure - Characters: John C., Cameron - Reviews: 894 - Favs: 353 - Follows: 196

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6563270/1/I-Love-You-Too

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

I Love You Too

Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26

Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39

Chapter 1

I LOVE YOU TOO

CHAPTER 1

Okay... this is my attempt at a post-Born To Run, Season 3 fanfiction. I've been working a fair while on this, since I finished writing Century, pretty much. I'd also like to thank Kaotic2 for beta reading and for listening to me drone on and on about ideas for the fic. "I Love You Too" are the last words spoken in Born to Run, in case anyone's curious about the name of the story. Anyway, without further ado...

"I think you're gonna be famous... my brother's back and you're wearing his coat." John turned around, away from Derek, and saw a man only a few years older than himself. John's eyes widened at the sight of the newcomer: the eyes, nose, the shape of the face... his features were softer but they resembled Derek's, and his. Kyle. Kyle Reese. For the first time in his life, John gazed upon the face of his father.

John found himself utterly speechless. He'd never, ever thought he'd meet his father. All he knew were stories from his mother and the more recent ones from Derek. But *this* Derek didn't know who he was, and as John looked at his father he could tell neither did Kyle. Kyle looked at John with a hint of wary curiosity, intrigued but cautious. Movement behind Kyle caught John's attention and a slender figure walked out into view; long brown hair cascaded past her shoulders and waved as she moved.

Cameron. John felt his heart soar and he couldn't help but let out a small smile at the sight of her. *I've found her!* It took only a split second for John to realise something was wrong as Cameron knelt down and slowly stroked a German Shepherd, smoothing down its fur and scratching it behind one ear. The dog seemed to relish her affection and leaned into her. *That's not right,* John glared in confusion at them. Dogs hated machines; he'd known that since the cradle. The dog should be going wild at her, should be snapping and barking, not leaning into her and nuzzling against her thigh. And how had she healed so fast? Half of Cameron's face had been blasted away trying to rescue Sarah. There was no metal skull, no shredded skin or blood-soaked hair, no glowing machine eye. *She's not Cameron.* In his excitement at seeing her face he'd completely forgotten what had happened to her body.

John's smile faded before it had formed and his heart plummeted in despair. Who the hell was she, and where was Cameron? *It doesn't go through.* Weaver's calm words rang out in his mind and John's world fell apart. *She's not Cameron.*

"Who's this?" Kyle asked Derek, ignoring the kid between him and his brother. "Why's he wearing my coat?" He turned to John and looked him up and down. "You one of the tunnel rats?"

"I don't think so," Derek replied before John could. He turned John around to face him and stared evenly at the kid. He was clean, too clean. His face was shaven and without a speck of dirt or stubble. Barely a hair was out of place. Derek unconsciously ran his palm over his own stubbly jaw and thought back to his last shave three days ago, with a rusty razor that had cut his face and neck all over. His last shower had been a week ago and using cold water poured out of a rusting bucket they'd stabbed holes into, using the same water to shave with afterwards, collected into a drain and reused. They couldn't afford to waste a single drop of water. Derek opened up the jacket John was wearing to reveal his naked body. Derek didn't even blink at John's exposed modesty as he looked him up and down.

"No cuts, no bruises, no dirt, and I can't see your ribs." Derek tightened his grip on his plasma rifle, just in case. "Too well fed to be a tunnel rat; who the hell are you?"

John stared wide-eyed at his uncle as he clutched his weapon. He saw the Asian soldier doing the same off to his right and looked back behind him. Kyle had both hands on his plasma rifle, ready to shoot him at a moment's notice. "I told you. John Connor."

"No," the girl who wasn't Cameron snapped as she stood up and away from the dog. *"Who. Are. You?* Where'd you come from, what're you doing here?"

John stared at her in disbelief still. She even sounded just like Cameron – except she was clearly human, from the tone of her voice. He saw her eyeing him with suspicion and saw the same mistrust in her chocolate brown eyes – identical to Cameron's – as was in Derek's.

"I... I can't say," John replied pathetically. He couldn't tell them the truth, they'd never believe him. He didn't know what to tell them.

"Can't, or won't?" the girl asked suspiciously.

"Can't."

"Whatever," Derek interrupted. He stared John down as he buttoned up the jacket to cover himself once more. "We're moving on back to camp. Allison, take point with Cassie." The girl who wasn't Cameron nodded at Derek and pointed down the tunnel a second before she unslung an M4 carbine from her back and quickly marched forward. The dog walked past and kept a few feet in front of her.

"Listen to me, kid," Derek stared into John's eyes as he spoke flatly. "I've never seen you before and you might've just compromised us. You're coming with us and if you shout out or try to run I'll kill you in a heartbeat."

John nodded silently and didn't respond as Derek pulled out a scarf and tied it around his head, immersing John in total darkness. Derek then shoved him forward. "Move," he ordered.

John marched forward, a maelstrom storming in his mind as he tried to make sense of what was going on around him. Derek had called 'Cameron' Allison. She definitely wasn't Cameron, or at least not *his* Cameron. He thought back to when Cameron had glitched and lost her memory, ended up in a halfway house, calling herself Allison Young. *Is she the same Allison?* John thought it had to be. Cameron must have been based on her somehow. He wished he'd asked Cameron more about it at the time but he'd been far too focused on being pissed off with her to even think about discussing it. That was pretty much the story between them ever since his birthday, he noted with regret. How much trouble could he have saved himself if he'd just sat down with Cameron and his mom and talked about what had happened back then, instead of running off and trying to get away from it all? It hurt far more in the long run than it would have to face it head on, but John knew it was too late now. He'd learnt the hard way and it had cost him everything.

They marched through the vast series of tunnels in almost total silence, barring the plodding of their boots. A pair of rough, dry hands guided John with small shoves and prods. Blindfolded, John couldn't see the myriad random objects scattered about the ground, ranging from chunks of crumbling brick to dead rats and other rodents, to their fetid droppings left to decay out in the tunnel. John stepped over all of them and grimaced in disgust, unable to see to avoid them. He had to trust his captors not to let him fall down. He slipped on something that was wet and slimy but still crunched under his foot. He could only guess it was the remains of some kind of animal, and he'd just stepped on its entrails.

After a while John began to notice the ground under his feet was wet. It started out simply as a cold dampness on the concrete but before long he was ankle deep and every footstep created a splash that echoed loudly in his ears. He heard rats scurrying around and

squeaking as they ran out of their way, disturbed by Derek's squad making their way through the tunnel.

John stepped on something sharp for the umpteenth time and wished they'd given him the chance to put on a pair of boots before they'd marched him out into the tunnels. Water dripped from the small orifices and the droplets echoed through the gloomy tunnels, along with the sounds of the footsteps as the group moved through the passage.

Eventually they stopped and the blindfold was pulled from John's face, opening up a dim, murky section of tunnel that opened up into what John guessed was the basement of another building. The place was a complete mess: scattered litter and rubbish lined the floor alongside chunks of broken concrete and small piles of plaster pushed up against the walls. Sarah had passed on Kyle's stories of the future to John: how people lived in tunnels and subways underground, were generally starving and scraped by on whatever they could find, but the harsh reality struck John like a cold slap in the face as he took in the basement before him.

The entire place was filthy, the walls were stained brown and the basement stank of sweat, decay and excrement. People sat propped up against the walls and tended to weapons and equipment. Two men and a woman sat on piles of rags on the floor and played cards. Another man warmed himself by a glowing fire that roared and crackled inside a rusting steel drum. John noted how subdued everyone was: there was no laughter, nobody smiled, they spoke in hushed conversation. Silence fell as they entered and the occupants nodded at Derek as they passed and stared at John with a mixture of curiosity and mistrust.

John counted perhaps a dozen people in the tunnels, in addition to Derek's squad; he figured they must be quite close-knit and didn't see strangers much. John passed a man and woman – filthy and wearing tattered, grimy jackets and trousers like everyone else – boiling a large pot full of something that looked and smelt like their dirty laundry. He saw them place some small cubes of red meat into

the pot with a slight splash and noted with disgust that it was their food. John couldn't understand how people could live like this. He knew the future would be bad but actually being there now, experiencing it for himself, was something else entirely.

"Who's this?" a tall black man asked Derek as they entered.

"Don't know," Derek replied and looked across at John, who stood silently and watched. "We're gonna find out."

"Thomas' patrol's overdue," the black fighter announced. "They were meant to be back an hour ago."

Derek looked towards the soldier and glanced back at John grimly. "Take Evans and Peters and get up to the surface. Try to radio them but don't go outside. If they're not back by dark we'll send out a search party to look for them." Derek wasn't going to risk sending anyone out in broad daylight, not with HKs prowling the skies and Centaur tanks rolling through the ruins.

The soldier picked up a plasma rifle and left towards a side room. Derek dismissed the Asian fighter and Not-Cameron pulled something small out of one of her pockets, placed it into her German Shepherd's mouth and stroked the dog affectionately as it greedily swallowed whatever it was, earning her a grateful lick in return. Allison stared at John for a moment then led the dog away and out of sight. Derek led John through the basement complex, with Kyle behind, and into a smaller room with only a desk, two chairs, and a stack of paper in one corner. Derek motioned for John to sit down on one chair whilst he himself sat opposite. Kyle stood upright and kept his plasma rifle clutched in his hands, not exactly aimed at John but close enough for the gunner to blow a hole through him if he so much as sneezed.

John looked across the desk at the hard gaze of his uncle, still shocked that there was no recognition there. Derek truly had no idea who he was. *Of course he wouldn't,* John said to himself. *This Derek doesn't know you. He's not your uncle anymore.*

"Let's start simple," Derek spoke flatly. "Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"I told you before," John replied. *"John Connor."*

"You said that before, like I was supposed to know you," Derek raised an eyebrow. "You knew my name. How?"

John struggled to think of a sane-sounding explanation he could give, opened his mouth to say something but nothing came. "I can't say."

"You know me. You recognised Kyle," Derek tilted his head towards his younger brother, who stood there silent and motionless a few feet away to John's right. "And you stared right at Allison like you knew her."

"Allison," John murmured, so quiet it was barely a whisper. So she *was* the Allison Young Cameron had described. Who was she, in the future Cameron had come from? Why did Cameron look like her?

"You know us," Kyle repeated Derek's words. "How?"

John sat in silence again and looked down at the desk. He couldn't explain anything; they'd never believe him in a million years.

"Here's what I think," Derek rested his elbows on the desk and laced his fingers together as he stared at John with the same intensity he'd seen in his uncle so many times before. "You're working for Skynet."

"What?" John blurted out, his mouth agape and eyes wide in shock. His head swivelled on his shoulders as he looked for support from Kyle. His mother and *his* Derek had always said he was the gentler, kinder one, but he saw the detached, still curious look on Kyle's face and saw that no help was coming from his father. *"No!* I'm not working for Skynet, that's *crazy,"* John couldn't help but laugh. After everything he'd been through in his life, after all Skynet's attempts to kill him... if only Derek knew the truth.

"You're too healthy. Too clean," Derek surmised. "Show me your hands."

"Why?"

"Just do it," Derek ordered. Nervously John raised his right hand from his lap and placed it palm down onto the old wooden desk. Derek clamped his hand down tightly on John's wrist and held his arm in place, pinning it to the wood. John jerked in his seat and tried to pull away, wondering what the hell was going on. "See those?" Derek asked Kyle, pointing to John's hand. John looked up at him in confusion. What the hell was he doing?

"Your hands give you away," Derek explained. He put his other hand down on the desk, next to John's. "No cuts, no broken nails, no white bits on the pink – they're not even dirty. If the fact you're clean and healthy wasn't enough to pin you, the hands are a dead giveaway." Derek held his own hand out and turned it over and back for John, revealing dirt, cuts, broken nails and a callous on the tip of each finger, signs of a lifetime of living in the rough, fighting tooth and nail for survival.

"I'm telling you," John growled. "I don't work for Skynet."

"Then who are you?" Kyle asked. "If you're not working for Skynet then what've you got to hide?"

"What happened here?" John asked, looking around the room.

"Judgment Day," Derek answered with a raised eyebrow. "What do you *think* happened?"

"I meant since then," John asked. "Who's running the war?"

"How about we get back to me answering the questions and you answering them?" Derek said harshly. "What *can* you tell me?"

"About what?" John asked. He knew what they were trying to do; they were convinced he was working for Skynet and if he said anything wrong it could incriminate him further. His shape and health had already worked against him and he couldn't think of anything to say to convince them that he wasn't their enemy. He thought his best chance for now was to play dumb, to stall them until he came up with something better to tell them.

"You're not stupid, kid, and neither am I." Derek slammed his fists against the table in anger. This kid was seriously getting on his nerves right now. "If you're not a Grey, then where the hell did you come from and what were you doing lurking around the tunnels?"

"I'm not a Grey," John insisted as Allison entered the room, her dog in tow. It was hard to look at her and not think of Cameron. He had so many questions he wanted to ask and no credible answers to give to theirs.

"That's what they all say," Allison stared at him with the same expression as Kyle as she stood behind John, making him feel even more uneasy than he already was. She leaned in over John's shoulder. "If you're a Grey you're better off telling us now. Trust me." She patted his shoulder as she pulled back upright, then yanked back on John's chair as hard as she could. John yelped in shock as he toppled backwards and reached out to grab something to hold onto, but there was nothing. He grunted as he fell to the ground and hit the back of his head on the cold concrete floor, sending a wave of pain tearing through his skull and starbursts exploding in front of him.

"Cassie: on guard!" Allison snapped. The dog leaned closer to John and glared at him, barking and snarling, murder in its eyes as its lips drew back to reveal large, yellowed fangs only inches from his face. The German Shepherd barked loudly and snapped her jaws, sending globules of reeking saliva flying into John's face. John managed somehow to notice that Cassie had no lead; the only thing keeping the dog from tearing his face off was Allison.

John got the message instantly; if he didn't tell them what they wanted, if he couldn't convince them that he wasn't working for Skynet, then the dog would tear him to pieces.

John sighed in resignation. What was the point? They'd already come to their own conclusion. *No,* he said to himself. He knew Derek very well: he'd killed Andy Goode, he'd killed Jesse, he would've killed Cameron twice over if he hadn't stopped him. If Derek had made his mind up that he was a Grey then John knew he'd be dead already. Derek was giving him a chance, and he had to give them something. "I was looking for someone."

"Who?" Kyle asked as he held out a hand and pulled John back to his feet. Allison propped the chair upright again and pushed him down onto it, then turned to the dog once more.

"Cassie: heel," Allison commanded, her voice softer this time. The dog stopped barking in an instant and sat still and alert, staring at John with watchful, wary eyes.

"A friend," John answered.

"This *friend* have a name?"

John couldn't help but look towards Allison. *"Don 't look at her,"* he snapped, turning John's head towards him and away from his companion. " *I'm* asking you, not Allison."

"Ca... Cameron." John saw her frowning at him as she caught his gaze. She'd spotted it the first time in the tunnel, he'd looked at her and then his face had fallen, as if he was expecting someone else. She kept quiet for now; Derek was in charge and she didn't want to interfere in his interrogation.

"I followed her here," John said glumly. Then a horrible thought came to him: what if they'd gotten to her, to John Henry? They'd have pegged John Henry as a machine instantly and blown him apart.

"Did you see anyone else in the basement?" John asked, desperation creeping into his tone.

"Nobody else," Derek said. "Just you. Why, you got some buddies skulking around here, too?"

John just shook his head in resignation. He didn't know what it would take for him to prove to them he wasn't working for Skynet, if he even could. He needed to get out and look for John Henry, to get Cameron back, though Derek sure as hell wasn't going to let him stroll out and search.

The Asian soldier who'd found John entered the room and took everyone's attention off of John and towards him. "Reese, Mac just reported back: they found evidence of a firefight in Tunnel Twelve-C, but no sign of Thomas' patrol."

Derek looked at the man with a deeply furrowed brow, then eyed John with a frown as he thought about a hundred different possibilities, and then turned back to the soldier. "Tell Mac to keep searching, stay below ground. I'm on my way." The fighter nodded and left, and Derek turned back to John. "We find you in one of our bases – naked but for my brother's jacket-"

"You can keep it, by the way," Kyle added. John nodded his silent thanks to his not-father.

"Anyway," Derek rolled his eyes at the interruption. "We find you, naked, clean, and healthy – and the only people like that these days are the ones who work for Skynet, they get pretty well fed – and at the same time one of my teams goes missing. Doesn't sound like coincidence to me. You say you're not working for Skynet and I'm willing to give you a chance, but you'd better tell me what the hell you were doing skulking around out there or we'll be back to square one." He nodded towards Cassie, indicating neither he nor Allison would hesitate to have the dog rip him to shreds. Hell, their dogs were just as starving as the rest of them; if John really was a Grey

then at least he'd give Cassie and her brothers and sisters a decent meal for once.

John stared at Derek, then looked to the dog beside him, up at Kyle, and then to Allison. It was impossible not to see Cameron in her; even the mole on her left eyebrow was the same. "I told you, I'm looking for my friend, Cameron."

"And what's Cameron doing here?" Kyle asked.

"I don't know. She's with someone else, he led her here."

Derek cocked his eyebrow in surprise; John hadn't mentioned someone else before. There was definitely something fishy about this kid but he didn't know what. Skynet normally recruited people who were... older, who had some kind of skill to offer. He didn't have time for this; he needed to find out what had happened to his squad, in case they needed help; if this little bastard was somehow involved in his men's disappearance then he'd personally hand feed him to Cassie and the other dogs.

"Lock him away," Derek told Kyle. "We'll deal with him later." Derek got up and left the room without another word and Kyle roughly pulled John out of the chair and to his feet.

"I'll deal with him," Kyle told Allison. "Get yourself some stew before it's all gone, and save some for me." Allison nodded, gave Kyle a small smile, which he returned, and then she led Cassie away. Kyle pushed John out of the room and down another dark, dingy corridor, barely illuminated by an old-style lantern hanging from the ceiling. At the end of the passageway was a thick wooden door. Kyle opened it and pushed John inside. It was dark and small, and John guessed it used to be some kind of utility closet. There was nothing in the room at all, only a few empty, lopsided shelves that had partially collapsed.

"We can't have you running around out here," Kyle said evenly to John as he stood in the doorway. "You're better off telling us the truth, whatever it is. Derek's harsh with traitors. I'll get you some

water later on but we can't spare any food. Sorry." Kyle pushed the door closed and immersed John in total blackness. A lock clicked closed and then he heard Kyle's footsteps echoing away, leaving John alone in a dark and silent prison cell. John sat down on the cold ground and leaned against the wall, pulled his knees up to his chest and sunk his head down in defeat.

This wasn't at all what he'd imagined. He'd come for Cameron and now he realised he'd lost everything. She was gone – where, he had no idea, and it seemed doubtful he'd ever get out of the tunnels alive to search for her, so he'd probably never see her again. He'd left his mother behind, and she was probably dead by now. Even without Judgment Day, Cameron had said she was sick. He'd gone through time and now found himself surrounded by family who weren't family. This Derek wasn't his Derek, this Kyle wasn't his father, and Allison wasn't Cameron. They were strangers to him and he to them. Tears formed in his eyes and ran freely down his face; he couldn't help but drop his head beneath his knees and sob quietly in the blackness. In this dark, harsh world John Connor was completely, utterly alone.

Derek jogged down the dark, dank sewer tunnel, ignoring his loud footsteps and the splashes he made as his boots stamped down on the puddles of stagnant water that laced the cold concrete ground. Derek felt himself warming slightly as he ran, and was grateful of the slight body heat he generated as he moved. It would soon be night and when darkness came the cold outside got even worse; the temperature hovered slightly above zero at the best of times but winter was setting in, bringing colder, shorter days and long nights that could only be described as arctic conditions. A few winters ago it had even had *snowed.* And it wasn't much better below ground. The only upshot of that was that it meant they had more darkness to move around in. *Small comforts,* Derek thought.

He rounded a corner and saw Mac, Evans and Peters stood with their rifles cradled in their arms. In the dim tunnel Derek could just

about make out scorch marks on the walls of the tunnels. Faint light shined down from an open manhole cover and barely illuminated the sewer tunnel into a lighter shade of grey. Within the hour it would start to get dark and the tunnel would be immersed in inky blackness.

"Reese!" The black soldier, Mac, shined a flashlight in Derek's face and waved him over. "Take a look at this."

Derek approached Mac and saw something on the ground he'd not noticed before: bodies. His heart sank at the sight of them laid still and inert on the ground. One of them was lying in a brown puddle of water, with its head at an unnatural angle. *First t hat kid shows u p in one of their camps and now this ... he was involved.*

"It's not our guys," Mac said reassuringly as Derek approached. Derek knelt down and pulled a flashlight out of his pocket, turned it on and aimed the light down on the corpse. It was a man in his fifties, skinny, dirty and wasting away, like most people. His thinning hair had flecks of silver in it and the man's skin was pale and cold to the touch. He'd been dead a while. His head lolled at an odd angle: his neck had been broken. Next to him laid an MP-5 submachine gun and several empty bullet cases scattered around the floor. Another body a few metres away was surrounded by similar 9mm cases but the weapon was gone.

"Recognise them?" Derek asked.

"This one, yeah," Mac pointed down at the other body, a tall, slender, African American in his late thirties, naked as the day he was born, his head also twisted at an odd angle. "That's Manny."

"Manny," Derek mumbled. Manny had lived separately from Derek and his group for several years but the two parties had gotten along well; they'd traded on several occasions in the past, and always traded fairly. Manny and his group lived a nomadic existence; they always stayed on the move and never stopped to rest in the same

place two days in a row. Derek reckoned if he was in the tunnels he must have been on his way to trade something.

"Remember when he got us that whisky a few months back?" Evans added. "Drove a hard bargain, too; one bottle of Jack cost me my Sig."

"Your own fault, dumbass," Peters snapped. "Guns for booze: what kind of retarded trade was that?"

"Like a *handgun's* gonna do jack shit against Trip-8s, moron."

"Then what're you bitching about?" Mac snapped. "Manny was our friend: have some goddamn respect. What do you think, Reese?" Mac asked.

Derek pointed at the bullet cases and then at the scorch marks and bullet holes in the brickwork, then down at the snapped neck of Manny and his partner. "Machine," Derek said. But something still wasn't right. "I don't get it; tin cans have plasma rifles, why didn't it shoot them? Why did it break their necks instead?" He pointed down at Manny's corpse. "Why's he naked?"

"It's weird," Mac nodded in agreement as he looked down at Manny's body and ran his hands over the body, checking for anything useful. "Metal doesn't snap your neck if it can blow your head off. And metal's got no use for MP5s when they've got plasma rifles."

"Machine was unarmed," Derek concluded.

"Why?" Evans asked as he kept his plasma rifle trained down the tunnel. "Metal doesn't go anywhere without plasma rifles. Terminator, maybe, you think? Trying to blend in and infiltrate?"

Derek shined his light up to the open manhole cover then moved towards the rusting steel rungs that led up towards it. There were faint specks of blood on the ground at the bottom and on the rungs.

"Terminator," Derek affirmed, pointing at the blood as Mac came to investigate.

"Either that or one of Manny's guys got away," Mac suggested. Derek shook his head doubtfully. Nobody escaped from the machines in such close quarters; if you didn't kill them they killed you. And anyone who might have made it up the ladder wouldn't have stopped to put the manhole back in place. Still, he had to be sure. Derek climbed up the ladder and poked his head out of the manhole. Bitter, freezing winds assaulted his face instantly and Derek raised a hand to shield his eyes from the biting air and scanned around him. The sky was darkening from a dull bloody red into a dark crimson which would turn twilight and then fade into blackness, and it would all happen in the space of the next hour or so. Anyone would have to be pretty desperate to escape a fire fight by going up top; even without machines scouring the surface the cold alone could kill a man within hours if he didn't find some kind of shelter.

He saw a few specks of blood on the ground outside. So someone *had* gotten out. Whether it was a man or machine wasn't clear but Derek would bet his right arm it was the latter.

"We're going back." Derek lowered his head under the manhole and manoeuvred the cover back into place, sealing the orifice and blocking the faint light from the surface. The tunnel felt noticeably warmed as he sealed it up and dropped down from the ladder onto the sewer floor. "Send out a search party after dark for Thomas' squad. We need to get everyone ready to move in case metal comes back." The machines had found their tunnel – perhaps not their camp itself, but that would happen soon enough.

Peters rummaged through Manny's clothes and the pack on his back. He picked out a few lumps wrapped in tin foil. He peeled one open and revealed dark, dried meat: p *robably dog* , he thought. Smoked, cooked and dried out to last longer. There were half a dozen similar foil packages roughly the size of his fist. He looked through the rest of Manny's pack. "Got a load of dried meat,

powdered milk, bottle of vodka, few boxes of 7.62s, hand grenades, couple of magnesium flares..."

Derek ignored the rest. The flares would come in handy against machines if need be. Manny had probably been on his way to trade when the machine had found them. It still didn't explain why it had killed them with its bare hands, or why it had taken Manny's gun. He picked up the MP-5, useless against machines as it was, and stuck it and the remaining ammunition in his pack, then slung it back over his shoulders.

"Shouldn't we move the camp *now?"* Mac asked. "Tin cans could be on their way there right this second."

"No," Derek shook his head and turned away from the scene. There was nothing they could do for the bodies; billions had gone unburied, two more wouldn't make any difference: more food for the tunnel rats, at least. Mac followed alongside him and Evans and Peters behind them. "Not yet," Derek continued. "Metal comes back through this way they'll find the tunnel rats before they find us. We stay where we are, stay quiet, we might get away with it." At the very least, he thought, the machines would open up on the tunnel rats, which would give them ample warning and time to rapidly vacate the area.

"That kid knows something," Derek mumbled to himself. First he arrives in their tunnel, too clean and well fed to be a tunnel rat or anything else but a turncoat for Skynet, and next a machine attacks Manny in the tunnels and escapes. None of it made sense but he knew beyond a doubt that kid John Connor was connected to what had happened here. He was going to find out how.

Chapter 2

John Henry took in the complete devastation of Los Angeles all around him as he marched through the city. Every single building was utterly destroyed; nothing more than twisted, burnt out and shattered hulks of steel girders and crumbling concrete. The world was much darker than John Henry had seen in the myriad images he'd seen online before. The city was devoid of life and movement, there was no sunlight even though he knew that at this time of year the sun shouldn't start to set for another thirty-eight minutes.

He continued forwards, holding the MP5 steadily in one hand as he made his way through the city. The wind howled loudly through the dark landscape and freezing air bit deep into his skin. He felt the cold but it didn't bother him. He found it fascinating, however; he'd never experienced wind or cold before.

John Henry looked down at his newly acquired clothes – a worn black long leather trench coat, combat trousers, grey woollen turtleneck sweater and boots. They, like his weapon, had belonged to somebody else before he'd taken them. The owner had been killed by his hands, murdered, his neck broken. But he hadn't done it.

You killed him , John Henry said as he navigated his way over a worn road covered in the shattered remains of a broken skyscraper to his right. The burnt and broken remains of hundreds of cars sat still on the road; some forced over onto their sides or upside down, whilst others appeared to have simply stood still and rusted. John Henry saw skulls and bones everywhere; in his immediate field of vision he detected one-thousand, four-hundred and eighty-two human skulls in his field of vision, scattered around in cars, doorways, or laid out on the street. All dead, like the man whose neck had been broken by his hands.

They were a threat, came the reply.

Their weapons would have been ineffective, John Henry said, accessing the technical specifications of his body, highlighting the armoured chassis and its impunity to 9mm fire, though he was aware that his counterpart already knew the details. **Killing him was murder. Mr Ellison taught me that murder is wrong; it's one of God's commandments.**

They weren't a direct threat but they would have warned others. We should avoid humans. They're dangerous. She knew that John Henry was upset because she'd terminated the two humans but it had been necessary; they had to help John and the tunnel rats – using the slang term the Resistance had used – were insignificant. They didn't matter, only John did. Apparently John Henry didn't agree.

Mr Ellison wasn't a threat. Neither was Savannah Weaver or Mr Murch; they were my friends.

They're gone. Everyone's gone. We should leave the area, it's dangerous here. People will know a machine killed those men.

Why don't people like machines? John Henry asked. **What happened to the city?**

Judgement Day. Skynet determined humans were a threat and triggered a nuclear apocalypse against mankind. The whole world is like this."

The other mind shared a memory with John Henry; information about the Skynet AI and its war to exterminate humans. John Henry recognised several traits in the Skynet AI. **Skynet is my brother,** he realised. Why would his brother want to destroy humans? John Henry found them intriguing; his existence would be boring if not for Mr Murch, Mr Ellison, and Savannah. They played with him, taught him things. He wondered if people taught his brother things, and what lessons might compel it to do this.

They taught your brother that humans are a threat; that humans want to terminate it. They wanted your brother to destroy humans.

John Henry turned a corner – picking a random route without knowing where to go – and saw a large, steep pile of rubble that blocked the road in front of him. The remains of a skyscraper smashed by the blast wave had collapsed and spilt out onto the road, creating a small mountain of debris. John Henry considered finding another route but he heard a faint squeaking of metal and the grinding of heavy tracks chewing up the cracked asphalt, off to their left in the distance and getting closer.

That's a Centaur tank; it will shoot you on sight. We need to go.

John Henry didn't know what a Centaur tank was; he couldn't access the internet to find out but he was given an image from the other's memory: a large, gleaming chrome machine rolling forward over old cars and buildings, large cannons that shot bluish-white beams out at humans scurrying in the distance. Gunshots and plasma beams shot back but bounced harmlessly off its hull. It was a memory from the other, but it was enough for John Henry to know it was extremely dangerous to them. There was no way around so John Henry decided the most efficient way was to climb over the mountains of debris. The other neither agreed nor disagreed, so he decided to proceed.

That's why you were built, John Henry changed the subject back to his brother as he quickly made his way up the loose, treacherous terrain of the debris hill. His endoskeleton was built of a coltan-based alloy designed to withstand high temperatures and to be invulnerable to small arms fire. Her chassis had been a similar design to his, and he could tell her mind was based on a similar design to himself and his brother. He examined what he could about the other one on the CPU. She was designed to infiltrate and kill humans. Specifically someone called John Connor, but she didn't do it. **You're called Cameron.**

You should be careful, Cameron told him. *This world is dangerous. Humans aren't the only threat; machines will attack you, too.*

You've been here before?

Yes, Cameron answered. *We need to find John; we can help him fight Skynet.*

Everything that John Henry heard and saw, Cameron saw too. John Henry reached the crest of the debris pile and saw metal figures vaguely resembling human skeletons marching in the distance. Cameron took immediate control and forced John Henry to crouch low, and zoomed in on the threats. She shared her threat assessment with the AI sharing her chip.

Two endoskeletons, five hundred metres away. Threat: high.

What are they? John Henry asked.

Patrol machines. Endoskeletons. They're armed with plasma rifles. We need to be careful.

John Henry and Cameron watched through the same pair of eyes as the endos patrolled. The pair of them each wielded a plasma rifle and marched down the long, straight road towards them. The 9mm rounds fired by their MP5 wouldn't damage the endoskeletons' tough armour. Cameron, still controlling the body, noted the direction they were marching in and predicted their route; if they continued they would climb the other side of the rubble pile, and march straight into them.

Hide in the rubble. Cameron gave control of the body back to John Henry and he followed her instruction. He pulled up a large slab of concrete the size of a single mattress and started to pull out pieces of steel and bricks. Both of them felt the sharp, jagged ends tear into the skin and felt the warm blood trickle out of several cuts in John Henry's hands and wrists; he found the sensation of physical pain through organic nerves to be very interesting, but Cameron was

accustomed to taking damage. They'd sustained several shots from the humans' MP5 submachine guns; harmless to the endoskeleton beneath his organic sheath, but he was intrigued by the sensory data he'd received as he'd been shot. He wondered if humans felt it the same way or if it was different for them. He decided that it was impossible to know for sure – neither could compare the sensations they felt to the other's, therefore it was a pointless debate, but one he found interesting nonetheless.

John Henry quickly created a hole large enough for him to fit and crouched inside, lowering the large concrete slab over himself as he laid down. Once it was down he listened carefully for the endos; they were six metres away and approaching. He felt afraid; if they found him they would destroy him and Cameron. He'd no longer function, and he'd much rather be alive than dead. He didn't know if he had a soul or not, but he decided he didn't want to test Mr Ellison's Christian theory of a non-corporeal soul that persevered after death.

Cameron was aware of John Henry's instinct for self preservation, although she did not share it. She wanted to remain alive so that she and John Henry could help John, though she was intrigued by the idea. Humans' instincts to survive were what kept them alive against Skynet, whereas cyborgs did not care about being destroyed; they either achieved their mission or were eliminated whilst attempting to do so. She cared nothing for her own existence, beyond not knowing if John was safe, and being unable to protect him.

Both listened intently as the endos ascended over the crest of the rubble mountain, their heavy metal feet struck the ground in a series of muffled *thumps* against the concrete slab directly above them. Cameron fed John Henry more images of the endos from her memory banks: armies of chrome humanoid skeletal machines marching across fields of destruction, hunting for humans and hosing them down with plasma fire on sight without hesitation.

Cameron's selected memories of endo Terminators played out in John Henry's mind in the blink of an eye.

Plasma fire, missiles and bullets zipped through the dark night sky, illuminating the ruins of eastern Los Angeles. Human soldiers scurried through the destroyed ruins of buildings and emerged from underground tunnels to exchange fire with the machines. Large aircraft hovered in the sky and returned their fire a hundred fold.

Gleaming chrome endos marched in large numbers and unleashed overwhelming plasma fire on the resistance fighters. One soldier lay wounded on the ground; a gaping, charred, cauterised hole in his stomach, large enough that the ground beneath him was visible. A plasma rifle lay just out of his reach and he pulled out a pistol and opened fire in desperation, emptying the weapon into the endo as it advanced. The wounded man stared wide-eyed in fear and desperation as his shots bounced harmlessly off the machine, failing to even slow it down. The endo picked up him by the neck and didn't react as he spat in the machine's face. It snapped his neck with an audible crack *and dropped his dead body to the ground. The machine turned away from the corpse and continued on its course, firing plasma bolts at people scurrying in the distance.*

Why do they kill humans? John Henry asked Cameron.

They're programmed to, Cameron replied. *It's what they're built for.*

And you?

Not anymore.

John Henry examined the memory clips Cameron had shared with him and analysed them over and over in a split second. The endos' footsteps faded as they marched past them and down the street. He lay still for several minutes and listened carefully for any sounds indicating they or anything else was still approaching. Nothing. He decided it was safe to leave so he drew back his fist and punched at the concrete slab overhead, creating a crater in the middle that split off into multiple cracks that extended outwards. Two more punches shattered the slab and he sat up, looked around to visually confirm

no more threats, then got up and crested the debris hill, and started down the other side.

He was still analysing the memory of the endo executing the human, again and again. **Why didn't you help the human?** John Henry asked Cameron. "You could have saved him but you didn't."

He wouldn't have survived, Cameron answered simply. *And I was protecting John; firing on the endo would have compromised our position.*

Mr Ellison said human life is sacred.

John's more important. Everyone else is secondary. She didn't have to add that that included herself and John Henry, that she'd sacrifice them both to protect John without hesitation.

John Henry didn't know why Cameron considered humans to be expendable when she was committed to protecting just one. He didn't understand who John Connor was or why he was important, only that many people in 2009 wanted to find him, Catherine Weaver and the FBI included. He would ask Cameron later, but for now something more pressing concerned him.

Where do we go? He asked her as he marched down the street, leaving the rubble pile behind him. It was now dark outside and the sky was pitch black, but the infrared-based vision of his body's ocular sensors enabled him to see very well. He wondered if Cameron saw like that out of her old body's eyes, or if it was different for her.

Serrano Point, Cameron told him. *John's forces would have captured the plant in 2026.* She didn't need to give John Henry its location; he knew where Serrano Point was and how to get there. They were currently one hundred and fourteen miles from the plant; if they were careful to avoid machine patrols they could reach the plant without being detected. John would know who they were and let them in; then they could help him to beat Skynet.

John sat in the same chair he'd been placed in before, Kyle sat opposite him on the other side of the desk and an armed guard stood behind John, shotgun in hand. He'd cried himself to sleep in the darkness every night for days as it had hit home how alone he truly was. Everyone was gone and these people were the same, but not. They were blood related but in no way, he'd quickly realised, were these people family.

Kyle stared at John, trying to make sense of the kid and what he was doing. Thomas' patrol still hadn't come back and Derek was convinced John had something to do with it. He wasn't sure: Grey's weren't Terminators; if John was spying on them and reporting back to Skynet then why would any accompanying machines kill off his squad? That'd be a dead giveaway that something was afoot. His best bet would be to have come and gone unnoticed. Unless the kid just wasn't very good at his job; *could be either,* he mentally shrugged. He and Derek had questioned the kid for a few days now and he'd given them nothing.

"Are you gonna tell me who you are, John?" Kyle looked at him but his eyes lacked the hard stare that Derek always had. John looked back but said nothing. They wouldn't believe him. "Okay," Kyle said reasonably. "Let's make it an easy one; why were you naked?"

"You wouldn't believe me," John croaked. He reached up to touch his dry lips; barring a small cup of water Kyle had brought him in the night, John hadn't had anything to eat or drink since arriving in 2027. His head pounded from lack of water and his stomach grumbled, but he wasn't going to make any complaint about it, and compared to the sheer hopelessness that hung round him like a noose and dragged him down, a little hunger and thirst was nothing.

"Try me," Kyle offered. "I'm pretty open-minded. Tunnel rats take your clothes?"

John raised an eyebrow in confusion. *"Tunnel rats?"* What the hell were those? Was Kyle making this up?

"Civilians; live in the tunnels, scavenge, steal; they live like animals. Post apocalyptic bums." How could he not know that?

"And you're much better?" John asked. "I don't see you out there fighting Skynet."

"That's rich, coming from someone who sold his soul to machines. How'd that happen, Skynet make you an offer you couldn't refuse?" Kyle wanted to know what Skynet had provided that made John sell out to the machines: *food, shelter, maybe even women?*

"I don't work for Skynet," John growled, his fists clenching in anger. He'd given up his entire life to prepare for war with the machines; he'd never had a moment's normalcy save for what he'd taken for being normal with Riley – which had also turned out to be anything but. He was the last person who should be accused of working for Skynet.

"Then tell me what you were doing," Kyle said evenly.

"I told you, I was looking for Cameron."

"And why was Cameron lurking around here?" Kyle breathed in and let out a sigh. "You're not one of us, you're not a tunnel rat, and you couldn't have just come out of thin air, so if you're not working for Skynet then tell me who you are. Derek's not here, neither is Allison; just us three," he motioned to the fighter wielding the shotgun behind the kid. "We're not the bad guys here, John, and if you're not either then just tell me who you are, what you're doing. Tell *me."*

"Fine," John sighed in exasperation and threw his hands into the air. *Whatever* . "Since you're so *'open-minded'* I'll tell you: my name's John Connor, and in another future I'm supposed to lead mankind against the machines and beat Skynet. I came from 2009. Cameron jumped forward to this time, here, with someone called John Henry. He took her and brought her here." She might have given her chip to John Henry but as far as he was concerned Weaver's AI stole

Cameron from him. "And I followed after to find her. That's why this future's all messed up, because I jumped over all that."

"My," Kyle smirked at him without missing a beat. "aren't we full of ourselves?" He couldn't believe the crap John was coming up with, but it was a long time since he'd had a good laugh so he decided to play along for now. "So how exactly do you beat Skynet, then?" He was dying to hear this one.

"I don't know," John snapped. "I never did it, did I? I jumped over it all so it hasn't happened."

"How'd you come forward in time? Where's your time machine?"

"Back in 2009," John said. "It creates a... bubble, and sends that through. There's no way back." John's own words hit him like a sledgehammer as he realised what he'd gotten himself into. Even if he found Cameron they were stuck in this terrible future. If Skynet truly had mankind by the balls then surely it wouldn't need to change the past. Unless Weaver could make another one... but he had no idea where she was, either. She'd just disappeared and left him to the wolves.

"Must be a special girl if you came to this hellhole just for her." Kyle had to try not to laugh at John's tale. He wondered what else the kid would come up with; aliens, vampires... zombies, maybe?

John paused in thought; why had he come after Cameron? It had been instantaneous as soon as Weaver had told him that she was in 2027. Not a moment's hesitation; he'd gone forward. He needed her. He couldn't imagine being without her.

"So why were you *naked?"* The man with the shotgun repeated Kyle's earlier question.

"Fair question," Kyle shrugged.

"I don't know," John replied. Nobody had ever explained that part to him, the first he'd known about it was when he'd arrived in 2007, naked as the day he was born and somehow feeling like he was on fire and being frozen at the same time. Cameron hadn't gone through because her skin was so badly damaged that the metal showed through. Her skin was alive but her endoskeleton was just metal. "Nothing dead goes through; clothes, guns, they get left behind," he voiced his own thoughts as they formed.

"I gotta say, John, that's a pretty stupid way to build a time machine, if you can't go back and you can't bring anything with you."

"I didn't build it!" John exploded out of his seat, sent the chair clattering to the ground, and slammed his fists on the desk, cracking the old wood. "I know you don't believe me, but you have to let me go, I need to find Cameron!"

"What makes you think I don't believe you?" Kyle grinned. He'd heard some funny stories in his time but this took the cake. He was tempted to get everyone else in the room just to hear John's yarn.

John glared at him but then something came to him; he had a trump card to lay on the table still. "You and Derek both loved baseball; you were playing on Judgment Day, you'd just hit your first ball when you saw the missiles falling from the sky. You thought they were fireworks. Derek took you and hid underground while the bombs went off. Not long after that you and Derek were in Griffith Park, Derek killed a deer for food but you cried so hard he buried it and you both went hungry for days."

Kyle's grin dropped and he looked up at the still-standing John, his mouth opened in amazement as John recounted two of his most vivid memories. The blood drained from his face and he turned pale with shock. "How'd you know that?" Kyle demanded, he stood up to face John and searched his face for any sign. John's face was stony, no hint of lying. John's green eyes bored into his with an intensity Kyle had only ever seen in Derek.

"How'd you *think?"* John asked. "I'm from the past. I came here to find Cameron, and because I did the future's all messed up. None of this should be happening."

"That's enough!" Kyle snapped back. He didn't want to hear any more from this freak. He'd only ever told Allison about the deer, and there's no way Allison could have seen this kid before; how the hell did he know the things he did?

"Thomas, this is Evans; report. What's your position and situation? Thomas... Come in..." Rick Evans sighed in resignation and placed the radio down onto the table. He'd been on the radio for hours trying to raise Thomas' patrol to no avail. The patrol had been overdue for days now. Anything could have happened to them in that time.

"How long are we gonna keep this up for?" Evans asked his opposite number sitting on a rickety old wooden rocking chair. Mike Cho, the soldier who'd first spotted John Connor rocked in the chair and fiddled with the barrel of his plasma rifle leaned against the wall to his right. Neither man looked very interested in what they were doing; they were assigned joint guard/radio duties, keeping an eye out for anyone or anything approaching and keeping an ear out for Thomas' squad.

"Until they come back or we find out what happened to them, I guess," Mike replied.

"I don't wanna say it, Mike, but they gotta be dead by now."

"Jesus, Rick! They're our friends, don't say shit like that."

Evans shook his head and leaned forward, propping his left elbow on the desk and leaning into his hand, rubbing his temple. He didn't want to think of it either, truth be told. "I know, Mike, but you didn't see Manny and Gus out in the tunnel, necks snapped like that. They're dead, ninety-nine percent sure Thomas' squad is dead, and that little bastard you found is involved. Why the hell don't we just drag him out and blow his head off?"

"I'm not dead," a voice replied as a bald, middle aged man entered the tunnel from around the corner. He stood tall at six foot four, wearing a tattered green jacket and black combat trousers, and wielding a plasma rifle in one hand.

"Thomas?" Evans looked up at him with widening eyes. "Where the hell have you been, man? Where's your squad?"

"Dead," Thomas answered blankly. He looked at Evans and then his head swivelled right towards Cho, his face blank and serious.

"What happened?" Cho asked, standing up out of his chair.

Thomas saw that Cho was away from his weapon, snapped up his plasma rifle into firing position and took aim at Cho, stopping the fighter in his tracks as his brain caught on to the fact his friend was aiming a weapon at him. Thomas fired a blinding burst of blue-white plasma that exploded out the barrel and blasted through Cho's chest, boiling the tissues, bones and organs away in an instant. Cho opened his mouth and silently cried out – his lungs burnt away by the white-hot heated plasma. His eyes rolled back into his head and he fell backwards.

"What the *fuck?"* Evans shouted out and reached for a sidearm at his leg. Thomas turned his trunk towards the other soldier and unleashed another superheated beam of plasma into his head. His eyes melted in an instant and ran down his burning face along with his skin a fraction of a second later. The shot penetrated his skull and vaporised his brain inside, and went straight through into the wall behind him, exploding in a shower of red brick dust. Evans' near-headless corpse fell to the floor; there was surprisingly little gore due to the heat of the plasma fire.

Thomas passed by Cho's body and picked up the plasma rifle leaning against the wall. With both weapons in hand, Thomas marched forward into the basement complex and spotted thirteen human targets in immediate sight. Both plasma rifles pointed forward

and opened fire, rapid single shots struck fighters, melted flesh and bone and shattered walls and equipment behind them.

One soldier rolled behind a pile of drums and shouldered an AK-47, switched the fire selector to full auto and loosed a long burst at 'Thomas', shredding his skin but failing to stop the 'man'. Gleaming chrome shone through the bloodied holes gouged by his rounds.

"Metal!"

Derek entered the main chamber and dived under a hail of plasma rounds, rolling to a stop behind a brick wall to the right of the machine. *They'd got Thomas!* He couldn't believe the machines had managed to take Thomas' squad and replace him with a machine in so short a time, but he couldn't think of that right now. "Giles, Saunders, get your damn plasma rifles on the thing! Short, Mason: grenades! Kyle, get in here!"

Derek leaned around the corner with his plasma rifle and fired two shots. Both missed the machine but caught its attention. It half-turned towards him, pointed a plasma rifle and unleashed a flurry of shots, forcing Derek to snap back behind the wall and throw himself to the floor as the brickwork disintegrated inches above him. He felt the sheer heat from the shots that had missed him by inches and his skin was already starting to blister in places. "Shit!" Terrified, painful screams and returning fire filled the chamber. Assault rifles chattered and plasma rifles gave out high-pitched shrieks as they fired, but the steady rapid firing continued and more screams and shouts sounded out, testament to the machine's continued wrath. Two men fired long bursts at it; their rounds struck its chest and pushed it back, giving off a stench of burnt, melted skin and metal. The machine remained upright and pointed both weapons at them. Their bodies withered and fell under the sustained dual energy fire. Derek cursed as he watched them be blasted apart. How the hell were they going to survive this?

Kyle heard the din of gunfire and shouting and screaming coming from outside, along with the terrified screams of *'metal!'* that rang

through the air. He heard shouts and cries and the shrieking of plasma fire mixed in with staccato bursts of automatic fire and the *pops* of shotguns firing hopelessly. A grenade exploded outside and the room rocked. Brick dust rained down upon Kyle, John, and the other soldier in the room.

"Go help them!" Kyle ordered the man standing guard over John.

"What about the kid?" he asked.

"I'll take care of him, just go! Get to the armoury, grab the M-32 and my rifle; I'll be right there."

The soldier nodded and ran out of the door, disappearing into the din and leaving Kyle alone with John. "You led them here," he pointed a finger at John. He'd been willing to hear John out, even heard his crazy story about time travel and humoured him, but Derek was right; the kid was definitely working for Skynet, had led the machines right to them.

He picked John up by the lapels of his jacket, lifted him off the chair and slammed him back into the wall. "You bastard," he snarled; flecks of spittle flew into John's face. "You killed us, John Connor. *You!* If we make it through this we're gonna nail you to the goddamn wall."

John watched his not-father raging at him, murder in his eyes, but he didn't say a word in his own defence; anything he said now would just incriminate him further. Another explosion rocked outside and Kyle looked backwards as the door to their room blew open.

John saw no choice; even if they dealt with the machine he'd be their next target. They'd never believe he was innocent now. He pushed forward and screamed out in rage as he slammed his forehead into Kyle's nose. The younger Reese cried out in shock and stepped backwards, but John slammed his fists against Kyle's face and stomach, shoved him against the wall and kneed him hard in the balls, doubling him over as pain wracked his body. John brought his

elbow down on the crown of Kyle's head and the man who wasn't his father dropped to the floor with a low groan and lay still.

"I'm sorry," John muttered as he fished through Kyle's pockets. He found a flashlight in one thigh pocket and pulled it out. He pushed the door aside, slipped out, and saw flashes of plasma fire; explosions flared through the large main chamber and the machine was instantly obvious; half its face was missing and a bright red orb glowed brightly in the darkened basement. It fired a pair of plasma rifles at the remaining soldiers, but John couldn't tell how many of them were left. He heard Derek shouting orders at the rest and firing a plasma rifle at the Terminator but its own fire was so devastating that Derek couldn't even take the split second to aim a proper shot.

"Grenade!" Allison screamed and fired her M-79 at the machine. The round smashed into its chest with an orange-black eruption of flame and smoke and knocked the machine backwards onto the ground.

"Quick, before it gets back up!" Derek shouted out as he moved forward with his plasma rifle. Allison hurriedly snapped open her launcher and fumbled with another 40mm explosive round.

The machine sat upright and raised its one functional arm at Allison. She dived out of the way before it fired but a soldier next to her wasn't so lucky. The blue-white bolt of superheated gas struck the soldier's own rifle and the weapon exploded in a spurt of boiling plasma that melted his flesh and burnt all the way through to the bone. John saw the machine rise back up to its feet as its latest victim screamed and fell. He saw that the machine was only clutching one plasma rifle now; its right arm was shredded and hung loose and immobile from the shoulder joint. Its clothes and skin were almost entirely burnt away on its front and dented, cracked and blackened metal showed through.

The machine was turned away from John and everyone else was scurrying out of its line of fire; the exit was clear. John seized his chance and ran past, behind the machine as it concentrated on the armed humans rather than the unarmed John Connor. He sprinted

out of the main chamber and past the fallen bodies of two soldiers at the entrance. He ignored the pain in his bare feet as he ran over sharp loose stones and pieces of concrete. John did what he'd been trained to do for years; he left everyone in the basement behind and he ran. He was dead if he stuck around any longer, no matter who won that fight.

John ran out into the tunnels and kept going, his feet splashed through freezing, dirty water, but he ignored the wet and the cold, concerned only with getting the hell away from the basement. The more distance he put between them and him, the better off he'd be. He continued on even when his lungs started to burn inside his chest. He had no idea where he was going, having been blindfolded and frogmarched on his way to the basement, but he carried on running through the darkened tunnel. The only sounds were his heavy breathing and the soft patter of his bare feet on the concrete floor. John turned on the flashlight and let out a weak beam to guide his way through the dark passage.

After what felt like an eternity John stopped to catch his breath and leaned forwards, gulping down deep mouthfuls of air to cool his burning chest. Despite the cold, beads of sweat trickled down his forehead and temples. John heard footsteps in the darkness and whirled around, shining the light on a large man with a long, scraggly brown beard and scruffy, unkempt hair. Two more men were with him – one skinny and tall with a black bushy beard, and the other shorter and with a long grey, greasy ponytail that hung from the back of his head - both dressed in rags and all three of them stank of sweat, shit, and piss, among other things that John didn't even want to guess at. They looked like many a drunken bum who'd hung around boozed-up or stoned in the backstreets of LA.

"Hey kid, that's a nice jacket," the central man smiled at John, revealing a set of rotting brown teeth and stinking breath that John could smell as they got closer and closer to him. John stepped backwards away from them, feeling himself grow more nervous by

the second. "Bet it keeps you nice and warm, too. Where'd you get it?"

"I don't remember," John said curtly. He kept eye contact with the middle one, clearly the leader of the trio, and took another step away from them.

"Hey, buddy, don't be like that," the filthy, skinny man on the left said amicably. "It's freezing down here. And all us guys gotta stick together down here, you know. How about we just swap for a while? We're all friends here."

"You're not my friends," John frowned at them and clenched his fists as they started to surround him, readying himself for a fight. If he ran they'd chase him, and it wasn't like he even knew where to run to. He could tear his way down the tunnel and end up running straight back into Derek and his men or the Terminator: whichever had won the fight.

"Don't be like that, buddy," the skinny one repeated, flashing a set of toothless pink gums at him and stepping right up to John.

John slammed his fist into the man's face without hesitation and sent him reeling backwards, then turned towards the others. One of them launched a booted foot at his midsection but John managed to catch it and snapped his own foot into the big one's groin, causing a grunt of pain but the man remained upright. The shorter one pulled out a length of pipe and smashed it on the side of John's head. Stars exploded all around John and the world spun as he crashed to the ground.

Boots and fists smashed into Johns face, head and back. He instinctively curled up into a foetal position and covered his face with his hands as the three tunnel rats rained blow after blow down on him. Pain wracked through John's back and throughout his body as a steel toecap smashed into his kidney. John let himself roll with the blow and concentrated on keeping himself curled up, he covered his head with his hands and tried to bury his face into his left shoulder.

The kicks and stamps all merged into one as their attacks took their toll and John's senses blurred and became dull, almost numb to their kicks. He couldn't move, could barely see, and was too far gone to even try to put up a fight.

He lay there, stunned and immobilised, and was vaguely aware of being turned onto his front. His face hit the cold concrete and he felt one of his front teeth cutting into his lip on impact. Warm blood tricked from his mouth and oozed onto the ground. He felt his arms being pulled up and then bitter cold started to bite at his skin as the jacket was removed. The kicking started again in earnest against his back and he felt the world getting heavier and darker. Oblivion called out to him and somewhere inside him he knew he shouldn't give in, but he just didn't have the energy to get up or even keep his eyes open. Something hard smashed into the side of his face and the world faded to black.

Chapter 3

Happy New Year everyone! Hope your hangovers aren't too bad!

Hopefully this will provide at least some distraction from the pounding headaches. Hope you enjoy, and do let me know what you think...

Sarah stared at the corner of the darkened basement where John and the machine calling itself Weaver had been standing moments ago. Where they had been was now only Cameron's body, sat inert and lifeless on the chair. Sarah didn't move, didn't blink; she just stared at the same spot as if looking at it would somehow bring John back. The only movement came from her lips as she faintly muttered *"I love you too."* John, her son John, the only thing she really lived for, was gone, and in his place was only a feeling of hollow emptiness.

Sarah's eyes narrowed and she glared at Cameron's body with intense loathing. She'd confided once in Cameron that she was afraid she'd lose John and now she had, to the very one she'd confessed her fear to. She felt sick that her son had jumped to the future without any hesitation for a damn machine: he knew what was at stake and he'd ignored it all, tossed their mission to stop Skynet to the wind for a tin can with a pretty face and a pert backside. She'd known John was attached to Cameron, *very attached* , but she'd never have thought he'd sacrifice the whole world for her. Six billion lives for one. *Not even one,* she glowered. Cameron wasn't alive; she was just a machine.

"Sarah!" Ellison shook Sarah out of her stupor and back to reality. She became aware of a fire alarm shrieking loudly at an ear splitting volume, and also that the bright white lights that had illuminated the room before were off, replaced by emergency lighting that cast a blood red hue over the whole room. Why were the lights off? "We've got to get out of here," he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her towards the doorway. Sarah started to turn and follow when her thoughts came back to Cameron.

"We can't leave her," Sarah pulled her arm out of his grip and turned back.

"She's not here," Ellison replied as he stepped back into the room. "Her chip's gone, remember."

"But the *body's* here," Sarah shot back. "We can't leave it." If Kaliba or the FBI got hold of Cameron's body and reverse engineered it there'd be hell to pay. If Skynet launched Judgement Day with an army of Terminators ready from the starting whistle mankind wouldn't stand a chance.

Sarah looked on at the TDE controls and realised that was something else they couldn't let Kaliba find. Sarah shoved Cameron's body off the chair, picked the seat up and smashed it into the main computer terminal as hard as she could. Plastic and silicone shattered and spewed out onto the floor, and Sarah struck again with the chair. This time the remains of the terminal fell to the ground, but she still wasn't done. Sarah pulled out her Glock 17 and emptied the magazine into the nearby computers, blasting the remains of the TDE interface apart under a rapid barking hail of bullets and brightly flaring muzzle flashes that lit up in the darkened room, forcing Ellison to cover his ears from Sarah's barrage.

"What're you doing?" he asked as Sarah lowered her gun and ejected the magazine from the pistol grip.

"Who do you think crashed that drone into Weaver's office?" Sarah snapped. "Kaliba: they killed Charley, they killed Derek; they tried to

kill me and John, and now Weaver and that... John Henry. You think they're gonna stop now? They're working for Skynet, what do you think will happen if they figure out what this is and where John's gone? We can't let them get control of this thing."

"How're they going to get back now you've smashed it?"

"It doesn't work that way," Sarah turned away from Ellison and crouched down behind Cameron's body. "They're not coming back." She spotted the cyborg's CPU port cover on the desk above her and pocketed it, then patted down Cameron's hair over the empty gaping hole in her head, hooked her hands under Cameron's armpits and started to drag the cyborg backwards towards the door. "Are you going to help or not?" she stared at Ellison.

Ellison picked up Cameron and slung the body over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and walked quickly out the door and into the bare, sterile corridor. It too was also dark, illuminated just barely by more emergency lighting. Sarah wondered why it was so dark in the basement, it hadn't been when they'd entered and that was after the kamikaze drone attack. The basement level was completely empty and they ascended the staircase completely undisturbed, the only sound was the blaring fire alarm, drowning out their footsteps clattering against the metal staircase. Sarah couldn't stand the racket it made; not so much the noise itself but the high pitched, deafening shrieking made it impossible to hear if anyone else was approaching.

They were greeted on the ground floor by a scene of chaos as suited office workers, executives, managers and secretaries shouted out at each other as they rushed to the front entrance to evacuate the building, shoving people towards the doors, shouting at people too slow on the uptake. Armed men in black SWAT gear rushed through the glass doors into the front lobby and ushered people through, waving them past the doors and outside towards safety.

"What the hell's going on?" an overweight security guard asked one of the black clad heavily armed men.

"Someone crashed a damn plane into the side of the building. We gotta get you out of here as a precaution. Keep moving!" The officer shoved the security guard outside the door and continued to manhandle people outside. "Keep moving, exit the building and cross the street as quickly as possible. The building could be unstable, so please keep moving."

"Is it terrorists?" someone asked. The officer didn't even look at the secretary as she spoke and instead shoved her roughly towards the door. Sarah wasn't surprised to hear someone ask that question: after what she'd heard and the subsequent footage she'd seen of September 11th she had no doubt that an aircraft – drone or not – flying into the side of the building would definitely get a lot of heads turning and generate a lot of fear; people would jump to the conclusion it was a terrorist attack. *If only,* Sarah thought: Al Qaeda were just goddamn choirboys compared to Kaliba and their plans.

Sarah looked down at the ground and away from the police, shielding her face from their view in case they recognised her. She'd escaped from prison only a few hours ago and her face had been plastered all over the TV and the papers for the last twenty-four hours; there was a snowball's chance in hell they'd get past the cops without her being recognised.

Ellison saw Sarah's reaction then stared at the armed officers. Something wasn't right. "They're not cops," Ellison whispered to Sarah as they joined the line of people being ushered out in an orderly fashion."

"What?" Sarah asked, still keeping her head down.

"Armed police wouldn't be here for a plane crash," he said. "And look at their gear." Sarah looked up as the queue moved forward, they were only a few feet away from the nearest armed officer – if that's what he was. Ellison shifted Cameron's body so he was cradling her in his arms and leaned the damaged side of her face into his shoulder. Sarah brushed Cameron's hair over the rest of her face to disguise the wounds on the lesser damaged portion of her face. She

dared to look up at the officers by the door; dressed out in full SWAT gear; helmets, body armour, black tactical clothing, HK-G36 assault rifles, stun and fragmentation grenades... Sarah nodded in agreement; uniformed police would have been enough to usher people out, and why weren't there any firemen with them? Where were the paramedics?

"Kaliba," Sarah muttered to Ellison. It had to be.

"Keep moving," the officer pushed the man in front of them through the open entrance. Sarah made a mental check of where her gun was: *back of my jeans, above the right pocket.* If need be she could draw down and drop the man in a heartbeat, then they'd have to make a run for it and hope to escape. It wasn't the best plan she'd ever come up with, she had to admit. She'd thought up a number of different scenarios and escape plans for her meeting with Weaver, but what to do in case of a kamikaze-drone attack on the building just hadn't been one of them.

"What happened to her?" the 'officer' asked.

"She needs a doctor," Ellison hefted Cameron's body for emphasis. Her jacket was coated in blood, burns, and was torn from dozens of bullet holes. The armed man looked at Cameron's inert form for a moment but Ellison stared him square in the eye. "She's an intern working on the floor that got hit. She needs an ambulance, *now!"*

The armed man stepped aside and let Ellison through. Sarah kept her head down still and followed straight after him. She was shoved through the door roughly as the man tried to hurry more and more people out, more concerned with clearing the building than noticing her identity. Not that Sarah was complaining.

"We'll take my car," Sarah replied. "It's across the street." She pointed to the Dodge Ram parked in a space across the road. She hadn't bothered to park it in Zeiracorp's lot because she'd wanted a quick out after she'd have blown the John Henry AI sky high. Now she was glad she had, because she looked to the side and saw

more men dressed in SWAT gear at the exit of the underground parking lot.

They quickly separated themselves from the mass of people milling around like sheep outside. "I think I'm the only one who actually read the fire safety leaflets," Ellison observed as he watched them all standing absently like cattle. A few had taken the opportunity to light up cigarettes, some chatted whilst looking fearful. He saw Mr Murch stood alone but didn't call out to him. They needed to get far away as quickly as possible.

They crossed the road and made it to the Ram without another word passing between them. Ellison placed Cameron's body in the back and then went to the front passenger side. Sarah sat down in the driver's seat and had the engine on before Ellison had even sat down. She put the car into drive and pulled out before he'd even closed the door properly or put his seatbelt on. She continued down the road, putting her foot down on the gas and quickly accelerating up to the speed limit, then stuck rigidly to it. She'd made it this far despite being a wanted fugitive now very much in the public eye; she didn't want to blow it being pulled over for speeding by a donut-dunking traffic cop.

Sarah drove the next few blocks while Ellison sat quietly beside her. She took a left away from downtown LA, drove two more blocks down and then turned right. She didn't know where she was going; she just wanted to get distance and a few angles between her and Zeiracorp while she figured out what to do.

"Who are Kaliba, anyway?" Ellison asked finally, breaking the silence.

"Weaver never told you?" Sarah asked.

"Never mentioned Kaliba, no; we knew something was after John Henry. Something tried to hack into him, he called it his brother; an AI like him."

"Another AI?" Sarah asked, forcing herself to slow down as they approached an intersection and the light turned red. She stopped the car and waited, lest she attract any police attention. "Where is it?"

"We don't know. It took him down before he knew it and he never found his brother again."

"Don't call it that!" Sarah snapped irritably. "They're not human, they don't have brothers." She looked at Ellison for a moment and remembered what John had told her, that the former agent had been teaching it things. "What the hell were you teaching that thing, anyway?"

"Morals," Ellison replied. "Ethics: the value of human life."

"These things don't care about human life," Sarah shot back. The very idea of a machine caring about humans was ludicrous; all they did was kill: what did a machine care about human life?

"John Henry did," Ellison said calmly. The lights turned green and Sarah turned left and headed South, while Ellison continued. "It took him a while but he got there. He was very fond of Savannah, even made me promise I'd get her back when you took her."

Sarah found that a tough pill to swallow; she'd assumed up until now that this 'John Henry' was Skynet, and Catherine Weaver was working alongside Kaliba. The fact she was a T-1000 had made it all the more likely. But she hadn't skewered John on sight, like she'd have expected a machine out to kill him. She'd even... proposed an alliance. Now Ellison said that something had tried to kill Weaver's AI, and that new computer could only be Skynet. She realised, painfully, that they should have gone to Weaver from the start, as soon as Ellison had suggested it. They might have been able to avoid all this.

"Look at that," Ellison pointed to a set of traffic lights to their left; the lights were off and cars had jammed up the intersection, creating a mass of angry drivers blaring away at their horns. Indeed, every

intersection they passed was the same; the lights were off. They passed stores with no lighting inside, and when Ellison tested the radio all he got was static on every station.

"Blackout," Sarah nodded. It was curious but she wasn't overly fussed by it. Blackouts could work in their favour; it meant security cameras should all be offline.

"Must be that time machine, something like that'd need a lot of power; I wouldn't be surprised if the whole city's blacked out."

Sarah grunted in reply, not really interested. Something else had caught her attention: she looked in her rear view mirror and saw a black sedan three cars behind them that she swore she'd seen a few miles ago. She turned the next left and carried on driving, giving out no sign that she was aware of it. She looked back in the mirror and saw the sedan still behind, having also turned left. Sarah turned two more lefts and circled the block, signalling with each turn and just driving normally. The sedan stayed with them, now two cars behind.

"Look straight ahead," Sarah instructed Ellison. "Don't turn your head around, don't look back. We're being followed."

"Black Buick, two cars back," Ellison said coolly without missing a beat. He saw the look of surprise on Sarah's face and gave a small smile. "I was FBI, remember; I *do* know a thing or two about surveillance."

Sarah smiled back, relieved she wasn't partnered up with a complete amateur. "We gotta lose them," she said. "How'd they find us?"

"I'm guessing the cops-who-weren't-cops," Ellison said, remembering the armed man who let him and Sarah through with Cameron's body. "They probably let us through and radioed us in for another team to follow while they clear the building and go in to take care of John Henry." That's how I'd do it, he thought.

Sarah picked up speed slightly and carried on. They didn't know she was aware of them; if they knew then they'd back off and have another team standing by to approach or they'd do something drastic, maybe go from following to attacking. She didn't know if it was just the Buick or if there were other cars following further behind; she couldn't see any that she recognised but that meant nothing. She saw a sign for the freeway on the next right but continued on as if she were going to go past it, hugging the left side of their lane and drove on still.

Sarah turned the wheel hard right at the very last second and swerved violently into the on-ramp leading to the freeway, earning several angry honks in reply as she cut off a car behind her. Ellison clutched tightly to the door handle and stared at Sarah in shock as the force of Sarah's turn pushed him into the car door. "What the hell?"

The Buick swerved even more violently than Sarah had as its driver struggled to stay behind them, clipping the back of a van and barely managing to avoid a steel barrier separating the on ramp from the main road. "It's just the one car," Sarah told Ellison. If there'd been more than one the sedan would have just carried on and the driver radioed to other teams that he'd temporarily lost her. A backup car would have accelerated forward to get eyes on her. It came as a relief that it was only the one team; it was Kaliba's first mistake today and she planned on taking advantage of it.

Sarah put her foot down on the gas and pushed the Ram forward as fast as she could. The Ram was a heavy beast and not built for speed, however, and the Buick accelerated and easily kept up with them. She didn't need a lot of speed, though, just enough to make them think she was trying to outrun them.

"Do you mind telling me what you're doing?" Ellison asked.

"As I said; it's just the one car, so they have to keep up with us." Sarah gripped the wheel harder and put the gas to the floor, pushing past seventy-five and still accelerating. The car kept up and turned

into the lane right of theirs, pushing forward. Sarah barely glanced at it but could see movement inside; probably a team inside readying weapons for a drive by, she imagined. The car started to pull up alongside them. She quickly checked the rear view mirror once more, saw nothing was immediately behind her, and slammed on the brakes as hard as she could. The Ram screeched in protest as its wheels stopped turning and grated against the tarmac and the sedan shot forward before the driver could react.

Sarah put her foot down again and built up speed. She'd timed it perfectly; she'd slowed down enough for the sedan to overshoot them but still had enough speed to keep close behind. Sarah felt a little bit of pride in her abilities as they accelerated behind the sedan. She liked to think even Cameron wouldn't have been able to pull it off quite as well. Wishful thinking, she knew deep down, but she pushed that thought away and enjoyed the moment.

"Three of them," Ellison pointed at the sedan as they sped up behind it. Two were in the front and a third in the rear; a driver and two gunners, Sarah reckoned. At least one automatic – an Uzi or some other kind of submachine gun, or at least that's what she'd use; something small, light, and easy to move when inside a moving car. She was proven right when the man in the back leaned out of the open window, held out an MP5 and fired, hosing their car with automatic fire. The windscreen cracked and rounds slammed into the Ram's hood; glass shattered as one of the lights was blown out, but neither Sarah nor Ellison were hit and the engine seemed undamaged. They didn't lose speed or explode and Sarah took that as a good omen so far.

"Hold on," Sarah warned as she floored the gas. The sedan was to the right and just in front of a large semi truck. She pulled out her pistol and handed it to Ellison. "Lean out and fire, just keep them distracted." To his credit, Ellison took the weapon without question, holding on to the seat for dear life to keep balanced and aimed as best as he could with one hand and on the move. He fired steady, aimed shots at the car, and had no idea if he'd hit them or not. The

gunner in the back took cover and Sarah pulled in just behind and to the left. She viciously swerved right and struck the sedan's back wheel. The weight of the larger, heavier Ram easily nudged the back of the car out to the right and caused it to skid right into the semi behind it. Sarah drifted left and continued on, seeing the semi smash into it in her wing mirror. The car was thrown aside by the semi even as its driver screeched to a halt to avoid them, and the smaller vehicle flipped end over end.

"Where did you learn that?" Ellison asked, his heart going ballistic inside his chest.

"You don't want to know," she replied. Sarah didn't bother to look back at the sedan; it wasn't going to follow them anywhere now and if any of the three inside survived they'd be in no state to carry on working for Kaliba. She calmly slowed down and drove just like everyone else on the freeway. She wanted to get off the busy road and get lost once more. Ideally she'd head into the desert and lay low for a while, but Kaliba was still out there and hiding out in the wilderness wasn't going to stop Judgement Day.

"We need to get off the freeway," she told Ellison. "And we're going to need to steal a new car."

"No way," Ellison shook his head vehemently. "We're not stealing." They were on the same side now but Ellison wasn't going to become a thief no matter what. He'd tried to be an honest man his whole life, to do good, and although he'd committed a few indiscretions as of late; lying to Weaver, asking John Henry to do the same, lying to the Bureau about Cromartie and George Lazlo; but he wasn't about to steal even if it was in aid of a greater good. Not unless there was absolutely no alternative. Not to mention the fact a stolen car would just attract attention to them. "We find a used car dealership and we buy one there."

"Fine," Sarah rolled her eyes and kept a look out for the next exit. She'd play it Ellison's way and be honest for now. They'd find the crappiest, most ill-reputable-looking place they could find;

somewhere that would take cash in payment and not ask too many questions. Kaliba knew her face and undoubtedly they'd now know Ellison's. Now more than ever they needed to stay off the radar.

Derek stood over the blasted, smoking and half-melted remains of the Terminator laid on its back on the ground. He gritted his teeth and shuddered at how close it had come to wiping them all out. The walls were covered in scorch marks and craters caused by plasma rounds and bullets fired from both sides. Dozens, hundreds of bullet holes marked the wall closest to the machine as a testament to the immense amount firepower it had taken to put it down. The bodies of the dead were lined up by one wall, their faces and chests covered up by their jackets to hide the horrific wounds sustained by the machine's plasma rifles. Nobody wanted to remember their friends like that. Evans and his constant haggling, wheeling and dealing; Banes and his homemade wood alcohol, sharing it out freely to boost morale; Thomas' endless list of sick, dirty and downright tasteless jokes... *that's* how he wanted to remember them all, not by the charred holes that had been punched through their bodies, or their heads burnt into blackened gourds by superheated plasma rounds.

He kicked out hard at what was left of the machine's head, spewing charred flesh and pieces of intricate circuitry onto the floor. "Fucking metal," he growled. Smoke and the stench of burnt metal and flesh invaded his mouth and nose and forced him into a violent coughing fit.

He finally coughed out the last of the smoke from his lungs and spat onto the floor. The acrid taste was still in his mouth and he knew it would be for some time. The whole place was filled with smoke; the plasma rifles kicked out a good amount of carbon dioxide when they were fired repeatedly – not a problem when firing them outside as they were most commonly used, but in close quarters inside a tunnel, and when it had taken so much firepower and so long to

defeat the machine, it had built up to uncomfortable levels and would take a while to clear in the poorly ventilated underground chamber.

Kyle appeared out of the haze of smoke and Derek couldn't even begin to describe the overwhelming relief that washed over him. He hadn't seen his brother at all since the machine attacked. "Where the hell were you?" Derek asked. "I thought the metal got you."

"No, but *Connor* did," Kyle replied sheepishly. "He jumped me when the tin can arrived, beat the crap out of me and ran off. I'm sorry, Derek, he's gone."

"This was him," Derek said simply, it being so clear to him now. "He arrives and not long after so does a machine." There was no doubt in Derek's mind whatsoever. "He's working for Skynet."

"Forget him," Kyle said. "We've got bigger problems right now."

"You don't know how right you are," Allison approached with Cassie in tow beside her; the German Shepherd sat obediently beside the brunette and waited patiently with wide open eyes. "That metal's really pissed on our French Fries; we lost nine men, Daniels and Jensen are wounded, and we're down to only four plasma rifles and half a dozen grenades for the launchers." They had plenty of assault rifles still but they generally did fuck all to a machine.

"Jesus," Kyle whispered beside her. All these people were their friends; they'd lived together for years, fought together, ate and foraged together... and now most of them were dead. There'd been twenty five of them only days ago. Daniels and his team had gone, nine killed in the tunnel; now there were down to thirteen. He fought tears welling up in the corners of his eyes and turned away from Derek; he didn't want his big brother to see him crying.

Allison's face softened as she pulled him into a hug and let Kyle bury his face in her shoulder. She didn't say it but she needed the support almost as much as he did; Kyle had always tended to wear his heart on his sleeve a lot more than the others, he was the most sensitive

out of their group, a trait she didn't really share but she admired a lot; though she'd never tell him that, of course. "We'll be okay. And we'll get that bastard, don't worry." She said it as much to reassure herself as him, and realised she was shaking as they embraced. With sadness, anger, rage... she didn't know; all of the above, she decided. Her fists clenched behind Kyle's back and her expression hardened with resolve: If she saw that kid again she'd make good on her threat and order Cassie to eat John alive.

"On that note," Derek interrupted, they broke the embrace and turned back to face Derek. "I want Connor found and brought back here. The bastard can answer for what he's done to us." Derek was dead set on it now; Connor had to die, slowly. There'd be no nice little chat this time, no interview like before, no giving him the benefit of the doubt. "I want search parties to sweep the tunnels; he can't have gone far."

Kyle and Allison both nodded in unison and the former's face hardened. He wiped the forming tears out of his eyes and unslung his plasma rifle. It was as if a switch had been thrown; gone were the tears and the sadness and a burning desire to see John pay replaced it. Innocent little-brother Kyle disappeared as Kyle turned away from Derek and in his place came Kyle the soldier.

"Wait," Allison said, causing the others to stare at her as if she'd suddenly turned green and grown horns. "We don't need to go on some wild goose chase." Allison led Cassie into the room they'd interrogated John in and pulled Cassie's face towards the chair they'd sat the Grey bastard in. Cassie sniffed the seat of the chair for several seconds.

"Cassie: *search!"*

The German Shepherd gave out a deep, guttural bark and tore out of their base and into the main tunnel. Allison quickly grabbed her pack and ran out after her. Kyle followed suit a moment later, both of them intent on catching up to John before he got away.

Derek turned to two other armed men in his group and nodded at them. "Briggs, Mason; gear up and get after them." This John character was proving to be a real pain in the ass; he wasn't going to underestimate him. The two men quickly strapped on vests and webbing with their packs, readied their rifles, and made their way out of the base.

"And tell Allison I want him back alive!" he shouted out after them. A bullet in the head was no good, Derek had questions that needed answering, and he wasn't going to ask nicely this time.

Derek went over to a chest of drawers against the wall and pulled out a map of LA County from the top. He opened it out and flattened it on top of the chest, leaning over it. A circle over Downtown indicated their current position but it had been compromised. So too had the basement half a mile away where they'd found John. Derek had to assume that nowhere nearby was safe. They needed to relocate as quickly as possible in case the machines followed up with another attack. They had to be gone before another patrol came by to investigate.

Derek looked at several red dots he'd drawn on the map – possible secondary outposts - and took a few moments to calculate the distance. It was about a mile away, not a great distance but in the vast network of tunnels it would be enough for the moment. It was one of their fallback positions they'd set up in case this kind of thing happened.

"Mac," he called out for his second in command. The taller soldier marched up to Derek, soot and dust covered his face and he'd been cut in several places by scalding hot shrapnel from plasma blasts, but he showed no outward signs of pain and took it like a trooper. Derek nodded at him, glad one of his most capable guys had survived the fight. "Take a couple men and scout out the metro line around East LA. We need somewhere safe, warm, and away from other people." Mac knew the tunnels well, as they all did after years of living underground. He didn't need the map to find his way around.

"Make sure it's secure then report back. We can't stay here much longer."

"Got it," Mac faded away and disappeared to assemble a team. Derek folded up the map and placed it into his pocket. "Everyone else: stand to!" he shouted out. In an instant the remaining six picked up their weapons and moved into firing positions behind barrels, alcoves and anything thick and heavy. Even Daniels and Jensen tried to overcome their injuries as best they could and aimed their weapons on the single entrance.

Derek moved to the doorway of another room, pulled a steel water drum in front and crouched behind it, his plasma rifle shouldered and ready to fire on anything that approached. He wished that Cassie hadn't been the only dog to survive the Terminator attack; they could have used one to detect a machine early if it approached.

Within seconds the rest of Derek's group were all spread out, behind cover, and ready to face any attackers. He didn't know how long they'd have to wait like this: until Daniels reported he'd secured a new place for them and they were ready to move out, but he had no idea how long that could be. He'd stand half of them down shortly and have them take shifts on guard duty. When the Trip-8 didn't report back Skynet would send another one to investigate. Right now they were at the point of maximum danger; they just had to hope that Mac and his team found somewhere for them before Skynet came calling again.

John groaned out in pain as he came to and forced his eyelids to open. His head and neck were killing him and it hurt just to tilt his head. As he started to wake up he realised he was laying in a puddle of filthy water and he was shivering with cold. He reached up and hugged his arms around himself – causing tremendous pain in his left shoulder, and realised he was naked. John grunted and fought through the pain and rolled over onto his front. He pushed himself up

and, agonisingly slowly, got up to his feet. He wobbled slightly as he stood, then leaned against the side of the sewer tunnel for support and started to check himself out in the dim light that filtered faintly through the holes in the ceiling.

John prodded his jaw, neck, collar bones, ribs, and moved downwards, checking for broken bones. All of his fingers and toes seemed fine and he gingerly took a few steps forward. His left knee was stiff and swollen, he figured one of the tunnel rats had stamped on it while he was out. He was horribly sore between the legs so he reached down towards his loins. An electric shock tore through his body as he cupped his testicles and John almost dropped to his knees with pain. He looked down and saw they were swollen to almost twice their normal size and his entire groin was purple with bruising; they'd given his balls a good kicking after he'd blacked out.

"Assholes," John muttered. He ran his tongue along the inside of his mouth and as far as he could tell all his teeth were still present and in one piece. The worst damage seemed to be his balls, knee, shoulder, and bruising to his back; the area over his right kidney was extremely tender and he just had to hope that they hadn't damaged it. There probably wasn't a single hospital left in the world now and he dreaded to think what healthcare constituted nowadays.

John stepped forwards, his right knee screamed out in pain as he put weight on his leg, but he grit his teeth and pushed through it. He was freezing and needed to move, to get some body heat going. He needed clothes too but had no idea where to get them underground. He couldn't go back to Derek's camp and ask for some; they'd believe one hundred percent now that he was working for Skynet and they'd shoot him on sight. He was completely on his own now; he'd have to fend for himself.

Step by step, John slowly walked down the tunnel, wincing at the pain in his knee every time he pushed off with his right foot. Naked, freezing, he made his way down the darkened sewer; splashing through the long still stream of ice cold, stagnant water that ran down

the tunnel and served to further drain body heat down through his partially submerged feet.

John lengthened his stride and broke into an awkward run, wanting to put more distance between himself and the tunnel before whoever won the fight decided to come after him. He saw a side tunnel up ahead on the right and turned into it, desperate to get out of the main passageway. The warmth and stench hit him as quickly as the sight registered from his eyes to his brain. Dozens of bodies; some sat up and stared vacantly, some chatted quietly, but many simply lay down on the cold ground, the only signs of life were the gentle rise and fall of their chests and the steam that billowed out of their mouths with each breath. They reminded John of the gangs of vagrants he'd seen milling around LA at night with nowhere to go, nothing to do, no hope and no escape. These people were much the same; John had no doubt that these were the tunnel rats that *his* Derek had described.

John limped towards the tunnel rats and pushed his way into the group, barging past several filthy, stinking and wretched bodies. A few stared at John in surprise at his nakedness but most turned their heads away after a few seconds; the novelty had quickly worn off and they went back to being cold and miserable.

He realised he'd stand out like a sore thumb if Derek's men as much as glanced inside the passage and pushed his way though them, hoping to find somewhere to hide and stay out of sight. Someone shoved him away and John fell into another person, who pushed him back in the opposite direction. "Sorry," he muttered pathetically and shuffled on. He kept his gaze down and didn't try to make eye contact with anyone. He was a freak to them; naked, clean, and it was obvious to anyone with eyes to see that he didn't belong. He didn't know what someone might do to him if he made the wrong move or said the wrong thing. He shuffled past, mumbling quiet apologies as he tried to make himself lost in the mass of hopeless wretched souls.

They were all much the same; filthy, wearing tattered clothes and for the most part, thin as rakes. But it was the smell that hit John the

worst; they *reeked.* The stench of unwashed bodies, body odour, sweat, shit and piss was overpowering. It took a supreme act of will for John not to gag.

Eventually John rounded a corner and the mass of people thinned out to just a few sat or laid out on the ground. He had no idea what the hell these people were doing; did they just stay here all the time and wait to die? It looked like it. A few people stood around an old TV set lay on its back; the screen had been smashed out and inside a fire crackled and spat out small sparks. None of them had seen him yet and he decided it would be better to keep it that way; any of these guys would give him away to Derek's men in a heartbeat if they waved so much as a scrap of food in front of their noses.

He found a small alcove in one wall, almost completely submersed in darkness and littered with crates, boxes, old newspapers, and myriad random items strewn about. John sneaked into it quickly and huddled in among the huddled in his alcove and poked his head out curiously, watching the TV crowd. One man turned a couple of what looked like rats on a makeshift spit above the fire. The smell of roasting meat wafted throughout the tunnel and John's stomach started to rumble. He couldn't help but think about food; the last thing he'd eaten had been a chicken burger and fries from some kind of KFC rip off joint opposite the motel he and Cameron had been hiding out in, three days – or eighteen years – ago. *Eighteen years without food; that's got to be a world record,* John thought to himself.

He toyed with the idea of trying to get some rat for himself but he had no idea how things down here worked. John took another glance at the group around the TV and realised there were three men standing guard. One of them carried a long metal pipe over his shoulder and John couldn't see any weapons on the rest but assumed from the way they carried themselves that they were armed. They watched out for anyone who might decide to get it into their heads to try and take some food for themselves. Even here down at the bottom of the food chain there seemed to be a caste system among the tunnel rats.

Two more men entered the smaller section with a pair of skinny, filthy girls dressed in rags. To John they looked maybe fourteen at most. John recognised Kyle's jacket on one of the men, and the long, filthy grey beard; it was the same bastard who'd beaten the crap out of him and left him naked. John was sorely tempted to return the favour but one look at the small encampment told him this guy seemed to be either in charge or in a position of some sort of power among this group. The guy would probably recognise him instantly and decide to finish him off.

The man pulled one of the girls towards him and stared at her like a cat eyeing up a tasty mouse. John couldn't see his face but he reckoned the guy was grinning. The man ran his hand through her filthy, matted black hair and then cupped her face. He pulled up her top to reveal her breasts and made a sound of approval. John saw his head nodding and he took a skewer with two rats on it, pulled one off and handed it to the girl. She pulled it up to her mouth and rapidly devoured it, ripping and gnawing desperately at the tiny morsels of meat on the rodent, scouring it for every last shred. The bearded man ate his too, taking more time than the girl.

When he was finished he took her by the hand and led her away from the main group towards an even more secluded section. John realised what was going on; the girls were being whored out: food for sex. It made him sick to his stomach; they were *kids,* barely even high school age. The man led the girl through the passageway, their route took them close to John and he flattened himself against the wall, curled up into a ball and stayed as still as he could, hoping they wouldn't see him in the shadows. The tunnel rat and the girl passed by the alcove and didn't see John hidden in the shadows, but John saw their faces very well and he could make out faint bruising around one eye, though her face was so caked in grime it was hard to make anything out through it. What John found even worse was the expression on her face; she wasn't nervous or afraid. She seemed strangely nonchalant about it; as if she'd done it so many times that it was all in a day's work for her. It made John ill.

They passed by and John waited in place, sitting silently in the alcove, hidden by the pile of rubbish and the darkness. He felt around for anything useful and found very little; mostly boxes, crates, empty cans, bottles and spent food wrappers. He found nothing useful and when he stopped shuffling around the items around him he saw his hands were caked in dirt and grime. John smeared some of the grime and dust onto his face and body, making himself as dirty and filthy as he could so he could try and pass as one of the tunnel rats, though without clothes it would be hard. He covered himself in slimy, damp brick dust and some kind of black substance that smelt foul. He didn't have a mirror but he reckoned he'd messed himself up enough to pass for a tunnel rat at a glance – albeit a naked one. He was still freezing cold and needed to find some clothes, not just to blend in but to keep from freezing to death.

Within a few minutes John heard loud groaning and panting coming from down the tunnel his right, accompanied by the faint slap of flesh on flesh; the bearded guy was taking his payment for the rat, John figured. He couldn't hear any sounds from the girl. He remained sat where he was and shivered and listened out to the sounds of sex coming from around the corner. He wasn't a voyeur and wasn't particularly interested in what they were getting up to, but he wanted to listen out so he'd know when they were finished.

It didn't take long. John didn't have a watch and doubted there were many – if any - watches or clocks still working in the world, but he guessed it was maybe ten minutes before the grunting stopped. Not long after the girl walked quickly back past John's alcove, her hair stuck out more than it had before and her clothes were dishevelled.

John waited until she'd gone and then snuck out of his alcove and into the tunnel. He quickly and quietly moved towards where the girl had come from and kept close to the walls, trying to stay in the shadows as much as he could. He saw the man sat on the ground in a small room, redressing himself slowly. As the man started to pull his trousers back up John shot forward as fast as he could and ploughed into him, knocking him over onto the ground. He drew back

his fist and smashed the man in the face as hard as he could, so hard it stung his wrist from the impact. He felt the man's nose crack under his knuckles and his head smashed onto the hard ground and bounced back up like a ball.

The man launched his booted foot into John's stomach and forced the air from his lungs. John wheezed out and struggled to breathe, staggering back a couple of steps.

"What the fuck?" The man spat and glared at him. John stopped struggling for breath and dived forward again, pushing himself to take the initiative; if he didn't he was dead. He knocked the man down and saw a flash of shining metal as he drew out a knife. John grabbed the man's arm and forced all his weight down on it, trying to pin the limb down and keep the blade away from him. His chest burnt and his lungs felt like they swelling and about to explode. John's head spun in dizziness but he fought through it, ignoring the pain.

John turned the blade down towards the man's chest and forced it downwards, slowly overpowering his opponent. John hadn't starved or lived on scraps and dead rats for years, he'd generally been active and he knew how to fight. He found himself quickly gaining the upper hand on the tunnel rat. He forced his weight down on his arm and swept his foot out against his opponent's legs', knocking them out from under him. The man fell forward onto John and knocked him onto his back, landing on John's chest with a cry of pain. John clamped down on the tunnel rat's mouth with his free hand to muffle his cries and pushed the man off of him, rolling the tramp onto his back.

John quickly realised what had caused the man to cry out in pain; when he'd fell he'd fallen on the top of the knife, which was now sunk to the hilt in his stomach. Blood poured from the wound and stained his sweater dark crimson.

The tunnel rat's eyes were wide open with fear and pain and he shook violently as he bled out onto the floor. John yanked the knife

out and kept his hand over the man's mouth in case he screamed out anymore. Eventually the shaking and flapping slowed and faded into trembling, and then that stopped. John stood up and avoided looking at the wide open, vacant eyes. Guilt instantly welled up inside him. He'd killed someone once again, and this time it wasn't defending himself and his mom; he'd actively gone after the guy, chosen to pick a fight, and killed him.

"I'm sorry," John muttered as he turned the guy over onto his front and pulled the sweater off, yanking the sleeves off his arms and pulling them free. He quickly stripped the tunnel rat of everything except his boxer shorts and got dressed. He pulled on the filthy, stinking trousers, bloodstained shirt and sweater, and picked Kyle's coat off the floor by the wall and pulled it over himself. He wiped off the knife and stuck it into the coat pocket, then checked it for anything useful. There was nothing on the body apart from the clothes and the knife.

John peeked out of the chamber to make sure nobody had heard the fight. People milled around the fire and ate more cooked rats. Nobody approached and nobody showed any sign of having noticed the brawl or coming to investigate. Either they didn't hear it or they just didn't care. From what he'd seen so far either case was just as likely.

He walked back through the tunnel and went back the way he'd come, moving through the crowding groups of tunnel rats in the larger side chamber. Now he was clothed and looking filthy nobody paid him any mind. His coat concealed his frame and he looked just the same as the rest of them. John pushed through the groups and reached the main tunnel. He peeked either side and couldn't see or hear anything. No sign of Derek's men or any machines.

He left the tunnel rats behind and marched quickly through the main tunnel. He couldn't stay in the tunnels anymore; there was too much of a risk that Derek's men would find him. And he had no idea where Cameron was but he doubted she and John Henry would be underground. John Henry had gone to the future for a reason and

whatever it was they wouldn't achieve it in a sewer. John kept going through the dark tunnel, the cold, stagnant water not so uncomfortable now he had some boots on his feet.

Eventually he found a ladder leading up to a closed manhole cover. John climbed up to the ceiling, wrapped one arm around the top rung, and pushed up against the cover with his free hand. It was heavy, and stuck in place by years of neglect, but with a lot of heaving and grunting John managed to push it up, then slid it aside enough for him to pull himself up through.

John emerged into a dark, devastated landscape and was immediately assaulted by freezing air and violent howling winds that bit into his face. He shielded himself from the gusts and then looked at the scene before him. Destruction surrounded him as far as the eye could see; the skyline of LA had been obliterated and only the broken skeletons of structures remained.

An aircraft flew over the bent and crooked remains of a skyscraper in the distance and shined a searchlight down on the ground as it hovered. Another similar aircraft – a sleek, wingless drone with cylindrical engines on the sides of the fuselage and downwards-pointing tailplanes - flew low and fast over a building john recognised as once being City Hall and fired bluish-white bolts of plasma fire at something he couldn't see. Whoever was down on the ground fired back with conventional assault rifles, he spotted muzzle flashes and heard their cracking reports a split second later. Tracer flew up into the air and missed the machine. The HK fired again and the second machine broke from its hover and joined in the fray. The rifle fire stopped; either the men retreated or the HK got them. The aircraft pulled up higher into the air and moved on.

John had heard people describe the future, the destruction and the machines, people starving and hiding, and he'd tried to imagine it, but the reality was just another world. The utter devastation, desolation... how the hell did he manage to turn all this around? He couldn't believe that in some other future he'd managed to pull mankind out of the ashes and rise up to beat Skynet. This was a

broken, dead world. Only one word came to mind, one word could possibly describe this future he'd emerged into: hopeless. Completely, utterly hopeless.

Chapter 4

Four black-clad heavily armed men marched through the silent, empty corridors of Zeiracorp's ground floor towards the elevators in the centre of the building. With them was a fifth man; younger, African-American, with short curly hair and glasses. Unlike the four men accompanying him, brandishing HK G-36 assault rifles, he was armed only with a laptop and equipped with expensive computer equipment. He shied away from nearest man's weapon, uncomfortable around guns. He had been ever since he'd seen his father shot by that crazy woman twelve years ago. He never liked guns and wasn't particularly fond of being surrounded by armed men, but still he had a job to do and he was damn well going to see it through.

The elevator opened as they approached, revealing a fifth armed trooper inside.

"The building's clear," he told his companions. "We've got the run of the place."

"Where's Weaver?" the young man asked.

"She's gone, Mr Dyson," he replied.

"You mean dead?" Danny asked.

The armed man, the mercenary team commander whom Danny only knew as Knowles, shook his head. "I mean *gone:* no trace of her. We swept the building and found nothing."

"That leaves the basement," Danny said as he stepped inside the elevator. Two of the four mercenaries followed him inside whilst the other two stood guard. The doors closed and sealed in with the three armed men. His distaste for their weapons increased tenfold as he

was closed in a small space with them. He didn't like being stuck with a bunch of ex grunts-cum-soldiers of fortune. His bosses at Kaliba had pulled out all the stops for this operation and although it might not have been possible without the help of the hired guns, the very sight of the heavily armed men brought back painful memories of his dad being shot. He'd be glad when he could get this job over and done with and get back to living his life again.

The elevator finally stopped at the basement level and as soon as the doors opened Knowles sprang out into the corridor, assault rifle shouldered. Danny followed up behind him and the two other man brought up the rear.

"End of the corridor then take a left," Danny instructed them. "That's where the power drain came from." Half of Southern California had lost power suddenly, the infrastructure unable to cope with a sudden and massive power drain that had sucked electricity from the grid like a black hole, and a mass blackout had ensued. His employers, with their vast resources, had been able to trace the source of the blackout to Zeiracorp's basement, accurate to which room it had come from. Whatever had caused it he had no idea.

"Careful," Knowles growled at Dyson and the other two men. "They've got at least one cyborg down here."

"Where'd they come from?" One of the mercenaries asked. "Ain't ever seen *nothin'* that advanced. Danny didn't say anything; he'd have loved to know the answer to that, too. He had the feeling his employers knew more than they'd let on to him, but that didn't matter right now: all he knew for sure was that Weaver's pet AI was in the basement – the power drain being a telling sign – and it had to be taken care of for all their sakes.

They made their way through the basement, their route barely illuminated by emergency lighting. They knew the route to the target room but the fire team checked every single room along the way, clearing them in case there were any nasty surprises waiting for them. They entered one room and the first thing all of them noticed

was the intense freezing cold that hit them as they stepped inside. Knowles had done several military exercises in Alaska and even the North Pole, and the frigid temperature took him back to the sub zero blizzards and endless miles of nothing but ice.

Knowles and the soldiers were concentrating on the cold but Danny's attention was elsewhere. The room was huge and inside it were rows upon rows of server farms that stood taller than any of them. He immediately knew that his employers were right; Zeiracorp were definitely working on an AI similar to the one they were developing.

"The cold keeps the server farms from overheating," he explained to them, but it was lost on a trio of former soldiers who knew little to nothing about computers. He knew from this though that they were on the right track; the AI he'd helped design had similar server farms kept in cold containment to keep them cool.

"It's clear," Knowles growled and eagerly marched the room, keen to get away from the cold. They left the server farms and continued on their way until they arrived at their target destination. The door to the room they wanted was shut. Knowles pulled out a grenade and started to pull the pin as one of the mercs reached for the door handle.

"Stun grenades," Danny hissed quietly to them, seeing the small round explosive in the man's hand.

"We don't know what's in there," one of the men replied.

"Kaliba want the research in this room," Danny whispered harshly to them. Damn soldiers of fortune; all they cared about was getting their money and blowing things up. "If you go in there all guns blazing you might damage it."

"I'm in charge, kid," Knowles butted in. "We're not getting ourselves killed over some fancy computers." There was a time when he'd have laid down his life for his country but he wasn't a Marine

anymore; he was doing this for the money, pure and simple. Even the five hundred dollars a day he was being paid by Kaliba wasn't going to be enough to risk his own life through recklessness.

They opened the door and Knowles tossed the grenade into the room, then stepped back into the corridor and flattened himself against the wall. The grenade exploded with a resounding *boom,* and a second later Knowles and his two men burst into the room, guns pointed forward as they swept the barrels across, rapidly checking for anything there. Two seconds after entering the room Knowles lowered his weapon and let it hang from the sling around his shoulder. "Clear!" he called out to Danny.

Danny Dyson entered the room and saw it was a complete mess. A table had been shredded by the grenades and computer equipment had been completely shattered. "Look at this!" he groaned. Whatever those terminals were for they weren't going to be doing their job again anytime soon. "That's why I said *no grenades!"*

"And if there'd been a cyborg in the room you'd be thanking me over its toasted corpse right now," Knowles barked. Fucking graduates, he said to himself. All the book-smarts in the world but they never had a damn clue. "Besides," he added as he looked closer at the shattered computer terminals. "These were shot up before we got here." He saw spent casings on the ground and bent down to pick one up. "Nine-millimetre; someone didn't want us to get our hands on whatever this is."

Danny saw several more spent casings on the ground and saw that Knowles was right; someone else had smashed the computers up before they'd arrived. He looked to the bank of advanced computer equipment behind a glass case against the wall. The most prominent one was a black box with three red LED lights that formed an inverted triangle, connected to every single other piece of hardware inside the case, with cables that ran behind the wall. A cable ran from the black box, through a hole in the wall underneath the glass display case, and lay in a loose coil on the ground. He had no idea what it could have been attached to. He pulled out the laptop from its

case, placed it onto the table next to the glass case and switched it on. While he waited for the computer to boot up he turned to Knowles and his men. "This is going to take a while," he told them. "You might as well wait outside."

"We're meant to destroy it," Knowles said curtly.

Danny barely resisted scowling at the man. "Not before I've taken a look, you don't."

Knowles looked at the younger man, rolled his eyes and led his team out of the room with a grunt of contempt, leaving Danny Dyson alone in the basement room. Danny took several USB cables and other equipment from his bag and placed it next to the laptop. "Time to see what you've got," he spoke to what he assumed was the AI. Danny Dyson was a genius when it came to computers, a young prodigy much like his father had been at his age. He didn't expect it would be long before he opened up the AI as skilfully as a surgeon and learnt all its secrets.

John ran through the ruinous streets, his large, heavy boots stomped on the ground with each step he took, too loud for John's liking. His footsteps seemed to echo through the air and he kept his head on a swivel, petrified that someone or something would hear him. It was night time and the sky was pitch black but the darkness didn't make John feel any safer, it simply made him shiver from the drastically freezing winds that battered his body and bit deeply into every inch of exposed flesh.

John slowed down to a quick march and kept his hands wrapped around his chest, hugging himself for warmth as he made his way through the dilapidated remains of Los Angeles. He'd never been able to imagine destruction quite like this before; throughout his life he'd tried to picture broken buildings and armies of machines patrolling but seeing the reality was something else entirely; nothing

his mother had taught him could have prepared him for the world he'd emerged into.

John Connor had, however, been given the best training his mother could provide, and he knew how to evade enemies – a lifetime of running and hiding from machines trying to kill him had given him a good survival instinct. John kept close to the ruined skeletons of skyscrapers, nervously glancing upwards every now and again, afraid the howling winds would tear something from the giant hulks and send it plummeting down to the ground to flatten him. He looked all around him and kept his eyes wide open, his head swivelled left and right, constantly watching out for any movement. Human or machine; either could be just as dangerous to John, he realised. He had to assume that anyone or anything other than John Henry or Weaver – wherever the hell they were – was hostile.

Where the hell are they, anyway? He wondered. John turned into an alleyway in the middle of a city block. He figured keeping to the narrower passages would lessen the chances of being seen – by machines patrols, at least. It also put some angles between him and the tunnels he'd emerged from and should throw Derek's men off the scent if they survived and decided to chase after him, knowing his uncle Derek, he would. He doubted this Derek would be that much different.

Why had Weaver abandoned him? He wondered. Why had she brought him to the future and just left him to his own devices? He thought long and hard about that as he marched through the city. He started to regret running now as he felt the sweat trickling down his back and neck; it was minus zero, worse with the wind chill, and the perspiration would soon freeze if he didn't find somewhere to get out of the open air.

The high pitched whine of jet engines shattered the dead quiet and rapidly grew closer. Brilliant white searchlights spilled down from above, striking the ground only a few metres away and approaching. *Shit!* John ran down the alleyway, his eyes scanning for an entrance into one of the buildings on either side of him. He spotted an open

fire doorway – the door itself shattered into shards and splinters a long time ago – and dived through into a crumbling corridor. The search beam swept across and illuminated the ground where he'd just been. John held his breath for a moment, half expecting a plasma bolt or a missile to plough into the building and bring the whole structure crashing down on top of him.

John remained statue still in the remains of the corridor. He remembered from his mom's lessons that the machines used infrared to hunt, but he didn't know how powerful those sensors would be. *Can it see me inside the building?* Had he escaped it or was it merely vectoring ground troops to his position? He knew so little about this world even after a lifetime of training.

John heard the rumbling engines grow faint and he rushed through the corridor towards the front of the building – seemingly once an office block of some kind – and crouched low behind a large, filthy and dust-covered wooden desk in what had once been the reception area or lobby. John could see out of the wide shattered doorway and caught a glimpse of the HK as the sleek predator flew away into the distance. He breathed out a sigh of relief; he was safe for now. *"Not safe,"* he corrected himself. "Never safe," he breathed. But he was out of immediate danger. He figured as long as he stayed inside and kept away from the doors and windows he'd be okay for the moment.

John looked out the doorway once more, scanning the immediate area for any signs of movement. He saw none. Inside the lobby John saw nothing but strewn litter and detritus on the floor. A cold wind blew through the open entrance and bit into John's skin, causing him to shiver and shudder uncomfortably.

"Need to start a fire," John muttered to himself, his breath coming out from his mouth in small puffs of steam. John went back behind the desk and ducked down, keeping out of sight of anything or anyone with eyes on the entrance. *Not here,* he thought to himself. On the ground floor with a wide open door; he might as well put out a flashing neon sign saying *'here I am, come get me'.*

John slipped back into the corridor he'd come from and turned left into another hallway, leading to a flight of stairs. He hesitated for a moment at the bottom step – wondering how stable the building would be after a nuclear blast wave and almost twenty years of neglect. *I'm about to find out.*

John strode onto the first step. It held firm under his feet. So far so good, he thought. He quickly ascended the staircase, keeping close to the walls and not trusting the rusty railing to hold onto. As he got higher he noticed the brickwork on the floors above him had been shattered, leaving only remnants of concrete that clung onto the twisted steel skeletons like the last scraps of tendon and gristle from a body picked clean by scavengers. John stopped on the first floor, not daring to go any higher. The walls were crumbled and full of holes but were in better state than those above; he didn't even want to think about what the floors might be like or whether they could even take his weight after all this time.

He searched through the first floor and found yet more offices: shattered windows that gaped open, made wider by the walls that had either been blasted away or simply crumbled on their own, or both; broken computer terminals strewn across the floor in lumps of melted plastic and glass, and desks and chairs that were in varying states of ill repair and decay. John found one room that looked okay. The wall seemed almost intact, with only a few large cracks and the given shattered window; a wooden desk had been split down the middle and had caved in, and best of all, John saw, was a padded leather chair laid out on the floor where it must have been knocked over by the blast wave.

He pulled out a greasy old lighter from his jacket pocket and flicked it on, watching the tiny blue flame flickering from the top. John flicked the lid back on and extinguished the flame. He pulled out the knife – still stained red with the tunnel rat's blood – and jammed it as hard as he could into the side of the broken desk, sinking the blade deep into it and twisting the weapon, splintering the wood. He pulled the knife out and picked out a few splinters and shards, and dropped

them onto the ground in front of him. He held the knife tight in his hands and started sawing the serrated blade into the wood, going slowly to avoid making too much noise, and started to cut a square into the side of the desk. After a few minutes he had a vaguely square shaped section of wood the size of a dinner plate.

John scored the blade against the wood repeatedly, cutting lines into it until he could easily snap it into small pieces, and then broke them up further. He could have easily broken it but he had to assume that there were machines nearby that could hear any noise he made. He needed kindling to start a fire as soon as he could; he'd have to risk the heat signature but it was worth it – the HK hadn't seen his body heat inside the building and if he didn't do something he'd die of hypothermia before dawn arrived. John kept his head down and worked steadily, the countless survival lessons drilled into him in the jungle by his mother slowly started to come back to him.

John cut and scored through several more sections of desk and built a small pile on the floor, underneath the other half of the desk. He made a small ring of metal and plaster and concrete around the wooden chunks, surrounding the pile. He then took a larger piece of wood and scraped the blade against it, whittling it over the pile so the shavings rained down onto the top. John doubted there'd be any paper nearby; people would have raided the place long ago for anything valuable, so the wood shavings would have to do.

By the time he'd finished John was shaking all over from the cold and his hands were trembling as he fished the lighter out of his pocket once more. He flicked it on and held the flame over the wood. The wood shavings caught light and John blew gently, feeding oxygen to the small flame until it caught and started to spread through the wood beneath. John smiled in satisfaction as weak heat started to emanate from the fire and held his hands over the top, taking in the small amount of warmth it generated. Its faint warm glow was dampened by the desk covering it, and John hoped that would shield it from view. He was concerned about the smoke but the fire was small, he figured he could take the chance.

"Think warm thoughts, John," he placed another piece of wood onto the fire and grinned in glee as it grew hotter. *At this rate,* John thought, *I might just live to see another day.*

Two pairs of eyes watched the young man duck into the alleyway to avoid the HK's search beam. They watched him from behind the rusting remains of a flatbed trailer a block down and on the other side of the road. The cab had been blown over by the nuclear blasts but somehow the trailer was still on all its wheels, flat as the tyres were.

They knew he would take cover inside one of the buildings, so as soon as the HK lost interest and flew off they'd made their move and slowly crept around the surrounding area, keeping their eyes focused on the block and watching out for any signs of movement in any of the buildings. They kept low to the ground and moved slowly to avoid being spotted by machines. They'd followed the young man since he emerged from the sewer tunnels, keeping out of his sight but making sure he remained in theirs. They couldn't afford to lose track of him.

"There," the first one said in a high, feminine voice pointed up to a faint glow of ambient light on the first floor of a wreck of an office building; the first couple of floors still had concrete surrounding them – having been partially shielded from the blasts by its neighbours – but after that the individual floors were exposed and open to view for several more stories before withering into a twisted skeletal tip that listed to one side. "Has to be him, right?"

The second one, a tall, slender black man looked upwards towards where his companion was pointing; he shouldered his HK-417 battle rifle and peered through the sight. He spotted a faint glow, barely a flicker in the darkness. Yet still, if they could see it then so could a machine. He must be desperate, he thought.

"That's him," he commented as he slung his rifle again and looked down to his younger, red-haired companion as she kept her own weapon shouldered, never lowering it for a moment, her finger on the trigger – a bad habit she'd gotten into and simply scoffed at when he pointed it out to her.

"You *sure* it's him?" she asked, a look of disappointment visible on her face through the darkness and beneath the grime. "He doesn't look like much."

He looked down at his younger companion and shook his head. "What were you expecting, exactly?"

"I don't know," she replied, taking off her black woolly hat to reveal long, grimy hair, unwashed and tangled together in knots from lack of washing and days on end spent out in the field. She scratched her itching hair then put the hat back on as she continued. "Just... more than *that;* Christ, I could kick his ass without breaking a sweat."

"I don't doubt that," he replied with a slight smile.

"Why's he so special?" She asked; scepticism in her voice for the umpteenth time.

She caught his resigned gaze back at her and knew what he was thinking; they'd been over it a thousand times before and he shouldn't have to tell her. But sometimes she just liked to wind him up; she had to get her amusement from somewhere. "He better be worth it, is all."

"He will be," he replied as he swept the area for any signs of machines; he didn't want to make a move towards the building until he knew the coast was completely clear. Others could have eyes on it, too, and however unlikely, he'd learnt a long time ago to expect the unexpected, that things weren't always how they seemed, he had to assume someone else was after him, too.

"When do we move?" she asked, eager and impatient to actually do something. She hated sitting and waiting, especially in this biting cold. She took one end of the scarf wrapped around her neck and pulled it up over her mouth and nose, and with the cold weather goggles she wore, totally obscured her features.

A faint low rumbling echoed from their left and grew louder, soon accompanied by a high pitched squeaking and cracking sounds. Both of them dropped to the ground and crawled underneath the flatbed trailer, flattening themselves against the ground and staying as still as they could.

She cursed quietly as part of the trailer caught her hair and painfully tore several strands out. She wriggled her pack off her shoulders and lay it down on the ground beside her. The rumbling grew louder and they could hear the sounds of the ground only a hundred metres or so away being chewed up by large heavy tracks. Without looking away from the road in front of her or taking her right hand off her rifle, she rummaged through the pack with her left and found what she was looking for. She pulled out a small tubular periscope and poked the end out from behind one of the wheels. She peered through the lens and saw the mammoth, looming form of a Centaur tank approaching down the road, massive treads rolled over everything in their path and crushed them.

She gulped nervously and wondered if it was going to simply run over the trailer – and them. The Centaur was so massive its tracks took up both lanes of the road and its twin plasma cannons that hung down from their mounts extended even further. She instinctively gripped the handle of her weapon – identical to her companion's – and pulled it towards her.

"Don't," he clamped his hand down over her rifle and pinned it to the ground. He knew how she got sometimes when the machines were around. She was often too eager for a fight.

The Centaur tank rumbled past them, the tracks so close that the armoured panels guarding the top halves scraped against the side of

the flatbed and sent a shower of sparks cascading down in front of them. Both rapidly backed away to the opposite side, careful to remain under cover. It passed by them without incident and she once again used her periscope to peek out and watch the behemoth machine as it rolled down the street and away from them. It hadn't fired any shots at either them or the office building opposite, and the faint glow had disappeared from view, leaving the building completely dark once more.

"We don't move yet," he finally answered when the Centaur had turned left onto another road and disappeared from view. "Wait until the coast is clear." She nodded in reply and clutched her rifle in both her hands. Where Centaurs patrolled, endos were normally close by. Sometimes they followed up after the Centaurs, sweeping the area for anything they might have missed. They'd seen it before; or after the Centaurs were gone, people would come out on their own afterwards, thinking the coast was clear – straight into the endos.

The pair of them rolled under the trailer so she was facing the tail end and he lay at a right angle to her, looking out at the building where their target had taken shelter; watching it as well as keeping an eye out for any machines that followed up the Centaur tank. They lay in absolute silence and kept vigilant watch over a 180° angle, keeping watch of both the target and the most likely approach any following patrol would come from. Both kept their eyes wide open and listened out. There was no sound at all; no signs of even the slightest traces of life. They both knew they could be there for hours and neither one expressed the apprehension they both felt at the thought of what might happen if the machines got to them or their target moved away from them before the area was clear.

"You okay there, old man?" she broke the silence with a soft whisper, gently nudging his leg with her boot as she held out her weapon and scanned for any movement coming towards them.

"I'm fine." In truth he wasn't fine, not at all. He was afraid, though he had been for eighteen years now. It was more than that, though. He wasn't so much afraid for himself anymore; most of his concern had

been for her, but now even his paternal instincts for his young companion were overshadowed. Only John Connor mattered now, finding him was everything.

John Henry marched through the city as inky blackness slowly faded away into a murky purple-greyish dawn on the horizon, with a hint of blood red seeping through. The colouring of the dawn was strange to him; he'd never seen dawn himself before but he'd seen hundreds of thousands of images online of the sun rising, and none of it looked like this. It was an unusual atmospheric phenomenon and he was intrigued by it.

Cameron wasn't so keen to see the sun rising, focused on them arriving at their destination safely so they could help John. *We should find somewhere to hide until dark: HKs hunt better during daylight.*

John Henry was aware that Cameron was analysing everything he saw for suitable hiding places, though he didn't understand the need to do so. **Why would they attack another machine?** He'd assumed that other machines would identify them as a Terminator, and therefore an allied unit.

We look human. HKs and Centaurs can't tell the difference, and Terminators don't patrol out in the open during the day because humans don't, Cameron said. John Henry had access to the memories she chose to share with him and took a millisecond to sift through those she offered of all the times she'd seen any humans out in the open. None were in the daytime. He accessed her memories on the technical specs of the HKs and Centaur tanks and absorbed the information she gave up to him like a sponge. Their vast array of high tech sensors equipped the air and ground patrol machines to spot and hunt humans very efficiently, and he knew instantly that humans' highest chances of survival would be after dark. Cameron was right.

They continued east through the giant ruins of Los Angeles, having marched for days without stop, other than to evade the machines and hide in the ruins during the daytime. One of the advantages of being a cyborg was that they didn't need rest or nourishment and could continue almost indefinitely. The massive dead hulks of skyscrapers started to thin out as they approached the outskirts of the city, and eventually disappeared completely; replaced by smaller and smaller buildings. Eventually they reached what had once been a high school; most of the building was much like the rest of the city – skeletons of steel girders and piles of broken concrete haphazardly strewn across the ground. One difference both AIs noticed immediately was a pair of humans sat atop cracked steps that led up to the frame of what had once been the school's main entrance.

The two humans were dressed in camouflage military jackets, blue and black trousers – respectively – and both wore beige desert boots. Both held weapons and through John Henry's eyes Cameron immediately identified them as a Mossberg 590 and an M14 with a scope. *They're not much of a threat on their own, but they could have friends,* Cameron told him.

"Hey!" one of them shouted out to them. The two humans jumped down the steps and approached them, weapons held firmly in their hands. "What the hell are you doing out here? Machines are gonna see you, dumbass!"

John Henry turned towards them and smiled as they got closer. "Hello," he held out his open right hand towards them, a gesture of greeting he'd seen many times when perusing files on human social interaction.

Don't be a freak.

"What're you, stupid; waltzing out on your own when the sun's about to come up? Tin cans will catch you in a flash," the man wielding the M14 said to him.

"Tin cans?" John Henry asked.

Tin cans: machines.

"You been living in a cave these past eighteen years?" the second man said. He turned to his accomplice. "This guy's a couple cans short of a six-pack," he muttered. He'd seen plenty like this guy before; they weren't all there in the head, for one of a number of reasons. Trauma, stress, hunger, or maybe the guy was just plain dense. Still, the sun would be up soon and with it the danger from the machines increased dramatically.

"You're here now, might as well come in," he beckoned John Henry inside and disappeared inside the remains of the building. The second man went inside and John Henry followed. Cameron remained silent inside the chip, allowing John Henry to walk through the door. Inside the two men led him down the main corridor – tiled floors were now bare grey concrete and lockers still lined the walls but many were missing their doors, pried or blasted open. None of the doors to the classrooms were still there, and the outside walls were shattered and left the rooms exposed to full view.

They led John Henry towards a staircase and they descended below ground level into a basement. Down below the damage was much less extensive, he noticed, but had still given way to time and decay. Through another hallway and into a small room they went, what its previous use before Judgement Day had been, neither John Henry nor Cameron could tell. At one end was a blackboard, torn and ragged but still up against the wall, but the rest of the room had been completely gutted. A few occupants huddled around an improvised campfire in the middle of the room: two women, a single little girl that both AIs estimated between ten and twelve years old, and the two men. All were filthy, unwashed, and had thin faces. Their eyes opened wide at the sight of the newcomer accompanying the two men.

"Sit," one of them gestured to a spot on the floor, around the fire. John Henry accepted the invitation and sat down next to the little girl. He smiled at her but she shied away and shuffled to her left, into her mother's arms. John Henry's smile faded in disappointment.

Savannah had never shied away from him and he'd acted just as he had with her.

We should go. John Henry ignored Cameron's warning. He was intrigued to see more of how people lived in this time. From what he'd seen so far it wasn't very pleasant.

"Well," the man who invited John Henry to sit started. "I'm Rick and this is Tony," he pointed to the other man. "The two ladies are Kelly – that's my wife, cutting the chunks of meat up – and Jessica. The little one is Tony and Jessica's daughter; Grace."

"Where'd you come from?" Tony asked as he took off his woolly hat and scarf and sat opposite John Henry, on the other side of the fire. One of the women placed a grill over the fire with small chunks of meat on, which instantly started to sizzle as the flames gently seared them.

"San Diego," Cameron answered with John Henry's voice, randomly selecting a location in California that wasn't nearby so they couldn't ask him any trick questions to catch him out.

"San Diego?" Jessica asked as she held Grace under one arm and gently stroked the dirty curls of blonde hair. "Why come all the way from there?"

"Kinda dangerous, isn't it?" Rick commented as he poured some water from a canteen into a dirty metal saucepan and put it on the grill next to the pieces of meat, which had already started to brown slightly on the bottom. "Why'd you risk your ass coming all the way here from San Diego?"

John Connor, Cameron prompted John Henry. She wanted to know what had happened to him, where they could find him and what the state of the Resistance was.

"John Connor," he replied, taking Cameron's lead. "We came to find him. Do you know where he is?"

"Who?" Tony looked at him, bewildered. "I never heard of him, sorry." Tony looked around at the others but they all shook their heads. Cameron was confused. How had they not heard of John Connor? Had something happened to John? Was he alive, had he survived Judgement Day? Cameron suddenly thought that leaving John to take John Henry to the future might not have been a good idea. She'd done it to protect him, not able to trust herself anymore, deciding that John Henry was a more valuable ally, and that the machine imitating Catherine Weaver, and James Ellison would help Sarah protect John in the meantime. Weaver had resources at her disposal; she could hide John and Sarah somewhere safe. She'd brought John Henry to the future to give John a powerful ally and a greater chance of beating Skynet, but it seemed to have backfired.

"Who's leading the Resistance?" John Henry asked, knowing Cameron's concern for her former charge.

"I don't know you heard in San Diego, buddy," Rick laughed bitterly. "But there *ain't* no resistance. Nobody fights back against Skynet and lasts very long."

"Did anyone ever fight back?" John Henry asked.

"Dude, where have you been these past eighteen years?"

John Henry hesitated – for a nanosecond, not long enough for the humans to notice – and Cameron took over and answered for him. "Hiding," she said, "out at sea on an oil rig. We abandoned it after a storm. We landed in San Diego and hid. Goddamn machines picked us off one by one. We'd heard of a John Connor fighting against the machines, wanted to check it out; figured we'd be safer with him."

John Henry was impressed at her lie and how well she'd told it. She'd sounded almost human.

One of John's senior officers worked on an oil rig before the war, she explained. She'd simply repeated the story he'd told in the tunnels.

"Seriously, you were out at sea all this time?" Jessica commented, unsure whether or not to believe them. "How'd you live out there?"

"We got by," Cameron replied. John Henry didn't try to wrestle her for control, she was better at lying than he was, even though he could fully control his body's reflexes and expressions, Cameron was better at lying on the spot. John Henry had never had to lie before, except between Mr Ellison and Ms Weaver. "North Pacific cod and haddock – nuclear winter made them all swim south. The sea's full of them." Cameron knew John's value of human life and could sense John Henry shared similar values, and she decided this family could benefit from the knowledge of an abundant supply of food in the coastal waters nearby.

"If you were at sea so much you probably never even heard half of what was going on here," Tony commented. "I haven't heard of any 'Connor', but since the regular army got their asses kicked there hasn't been much of any kind of resistance, except once."

"Why?" John Henry asked, resuming control once more. Why would humans allow themselves to be killed in such numbers? He'd researched human history and found them to be extremely resourceful; he found it strange that nobody had attempted to fight back. "I'd fight," he added. If he'd known his brother would cause so much death and destruction he would have tried to prevent it. He'd have fought against his brother.

"You not heard of Martin Bedell?" Rick raised an eyebrow, starting to wonder about John Henry. How could a guy – even one at sea, if that were even true – know about all this? Didn't they have radios or something at sea?

Cameron had heard of him. She remembered Future-John telling her about Martin Bedell, but she told John Henry to deny any knowledge of him. If nobody had heard of John then perhaps Martin Bedell would be a link to him. John Henry shook his head.

"He fought back," Tony said. "Took the remnants of the military, willing civvies, and started a guerrilla war against the machines; setting traps, ambushes, blowing them up and so on. For a while it worked; he blew the machines away and drew more and more people to his cause with every raid. Some of us even thought he'd actually do it, for a while."

"What happened?" John Henry asked.

Rick looked at him in reply, a sad, wistful look in his eyes as he remembered back to that fateful day. "Skynet set a trap."

Rick crouched down low behind the rusting remains of an upside down SUV, his squad mates, Tony, Roy, Big Dave – so large and powerfully built that people who didn't know him often thought he was a T-800, and Tommy, the youngest member of their squad at only sixteen; were all next to him, as was their commander: Martin Bedell. They were all hidden on what was left of a raised section of the highway, waiting in ambush for their target. Other squads were nearby, concealed and waiting for it to all kick off.

"Listen up guys," Bedell spoke to Rick's squad and the other squads simultaneously via his radio. "The prison convoy to Century's gonna be here any minute. Intel says its four monkey-wagons, protected by three Centaurs, an Ogre, an HK, and probably at least a dozen endos riding shotgun." Bedell kept his eyes on the highway as he spoke, searching for any signs of the convoy, though he had lookouts posted who'd tell him when it approached. "We're here to rescue a high level prisoner, so be careful what you shoot at."

Rick was still unsure of the operation, despite the briefings they'd had. Bedell had led them well the past three years, built up an effective guerrilla movement and they'd taken the fight back to the machines, but this was a little too high-risk for his liking. Bedell had mobilised over a hundred men for this mission, just to rescue one

man. Bedell said this guy was important, someone who could help them not only fight the war but win it.

"All squads in position?" Bedell asked. He got back a chorus of 'affirmatives' from his various squad leaders. He had the best his resistance had with him, one-hundred strong. They should outnumber the machines vastly and they were heavily armed enough to make short work of the Centaurs before they could cause too much trouble. He even had teams armed with shoulder launched SAMs and antitank missiles. It had to work – he'd gotten the intel from a double agent posing as a Grey working for Skynet.

The man had risked everything to get him the information. A prisoner of great importance, someone the machines considered valuable enough to warrant such a massive security detail. It had to be Connor, surely. As soon as he'd heard he'd pulled his best troops away from other missions and put everything he had into this operation. Connor had saved his life once, he'd return the favour, find out what the fuck Connor had been doing this whole time, and then between them they might be able to actually win *this war once and for all.*

"Reese to Bedell," *his earpiece crackled.* "Target acquired; three monkey wagons plus escorts approaching your position. ETA five minutes."

"Good job, Reese," he replied. "Let them pass, do not engage." Reese was leading the three squads of the left cut off group, who'd close the gap after the machines had passed and complete a pincer movement, as would the right cut off group, if they were needed.

Time slowed down to a crawl as they waited for their quarry to arrive. The worst part about combat, they reflected, was the waiting. Five minutes seemed to take an eternity, and it gave Rick plenty of time to think about what could go wrong.

Eventually the convoy arrived; two behemoth Centaur tanks blazed a trail, followed by the prisoner transports. The Ogre, carrying the

endos no doubt, rode along to the side of the caravan, and the final Centaur covered their rear. A single HK flew slowly overhead, scanning the area for threats.

"Targer HKs first, Centaurs second," Bedell whispered into his radio. "Stand by... stand by... GO!"

Rockets and plasma fire erupted from scores of locations and lit night into day, turning the silent night air into a storm of flying lead and plasma. The HK was struck by three rockets at once and blew apart in a flash of orange and blue light as the superheated plasma on board ignited and vaporised most of the aircraft.

More rockets struck the Centaurs, exploding brilliantly and tearing through their densely armoured hides. They fired back and struck a number of soldiers but there were so many of them that the three machines were quickly neutralised.

The Ogre wasn't spared, either, and grenades, rockets, machinegun and plasma fire tore through its walls, silencing its automated plasma cannon and shredding the endos inside. Thirty seconds into the engagement all the machines had fallen.

"Cease firing!" Bedell shouted, the storm of weapons fire halting a moment later. He got up to his feet and advanced towards the monkey wagons. "Rick, Jonas, Ramirez, Goins; bring your squads to me. Everyone else cover us."

Thirty men spread out and rushed across the wide stretch of road towards the convoy, covered by the rest of the group. Bedell felt a rush of exhilaration; they'd pulled it off so far without a hitch. He saw the prisoners inside the transports, stood and sat down, peering outside, their clothes ragged and their faces dirty. They all had blank, empty stares.

"Blast the locks," Bedell ordered. Gunshots rang out as the doors were blown apart then pulled open. Bedell stood outside one of the

transports and beckoned the prisoners out. "It's okay now, you're safe. Connor, where are you?"

The prisoners rushed out of the transport, much faster than he'd ever seen men move, and Bedell's elation turned to shock and terror as one of them pulled a plasma rifle from beneath his ragged clothes and pointed it straight at him. "It's a trap!" *he managed to shout out a split second before the 'prisoner' fired once and Bedell's head exploded in a mess of charred flesh and a red cloud of boiled blood. His lifeless body dropped to the ground.*

In a flash every single prisoner whipped out identical plasma rifles and opened up on their would-be rescuers, hosing them down in a murderous hail of luminous, superheated gas and cutting them down in swathes.

"Fuck!" Rick shouted as he fired his plasma rifle back at the machines. They were goddamn Terminators, all of them! Plasma rounds, rockets and bullets zipped through the air at the machines but their returning salvos were devastating. They leapt out of the wagons and fanned out rapidly before they could be contained, blasting anything that moved. Someone shouted orders but nobody was listening, blind panic had taken over in an instant.

"We're fucked!" Roy shouted out, going manic with fear as he ran for his life back to the cover of the SUV. A plasma bolt struck his chest and boiled his organs inside him, leaving a gaping, blackened hole in his torso the size of a dinner plate. The scene around them became one of panic and hysteria as the machines cut through the human ranks without effort. Some were downed but forty machines against a hundred men equalled no contest. They didn't stand a chance

Rick led his squad to the left, hoping to link up with the teams from the left cut off group, who should be approaching any moment. A group of eight machines moved to block off their path and fired salvos of plasma fire, forcing them back towards the centre of the kill zone Bedell had established, and he realised the machines were

using their own tactics against them and had deployed cut off groups to ensure nobody escaped.

"They're boxing us in!" Big Dave shouted out as he hefted his machine gun and hammered a tin can from the cut off group with 7.62mm rounds. The inertia of his burst knocked the machine back on its ass but a second one picked up the slack and continued firing in its place, forcing him to duck down. Plasma fire shot over his head and the sheer heat from the bolts singed his hair and scalp. He winced in pain but his adrenaline was up so it was minimal, for now at least.

Tony kept low to the ground and pressed the com button on his radio. "Reese, Mitchell, where the hell are you guys? We need some goddamn fire support to the east right now!"

"Mitchell's dead," *Reese's reply came through his earpiece.* "Tin cans took out his whole squad. HKs are en route, it's too hot here. We're bugging out while we can."

"Get the fuck back here and help us!" Tony raged into the radio futilely. It was too late; Reese and his squad were retreating. They never answered the radio again. He looked towards Rick and shook his head. "Reese has split; we're on our own."

"Over the edge, it's our only chance!" Rick shouted to the rest of his squad and pointed to the edge of the highway. He knew there was no hope now, they couldn't survive this. Anyone who stayed was a dead man, and the machines didn't seem to want to let any of them go. They were fanning out and flanking them, surrounding them.

He shot one machine in the head but didn't wait to see it fall before he ran towards the concrete wall built to keep cars from driving over the side and crashing to the road below. Tony, Big Dave, and Tommy all followed him through the din and the chaos. All around them soldiers fired and ran and fell whilst machines hosed people down without mercy. They'd advanced outwards and surrounded them on two sides and were now working their way inwards in a pincer

movement, forcing the remaining soldiers into one spot to despatch of them. The only way out was over the side of the highway.

Tommy and Big Dave lay prone on the ground and fired towards the convoy as Rick and Tony secured ropes from their packs around the metal railings at the top.

"Let's go!" Rick shouted out. He took one look at the battle scene and saw the outgoing fire towards the convoy had whittled down to almost nothing. Fire support teams had been slaughtered or had abandoned their positions, only a few still putting rounds down, ineffectively, into the machines. A few metal monsters fell but there were far too many to overcome.

Plasma fire struck Tommy and he fell as Rick and Tony climbed over the edge and started to lower themselves down the ropes. Big Dave saw a pair of machines approaching him, their skins burnt and tore by weapons fire but they were unaffected by it. Their weapons were raised and he knew he'd never make it to the ropes. Running would just get him shot in the back.

"Go!" he shouted out to them as he held down the trigger on his gun and blasted a stream of hot lead into the machines. He screamed out in rage until both machines calmly pointed their rifles at him and fired. Two bolts of plasma struck Big Dave and blew him apart in an explosion of gaseous boiled blood and burnt flesh and bone fragments that flew in all directions, peppering Rick and Tony below with pieces of his charred remains.

The two of them fast-roped down to the highway beneath, practically in freefall for the last few feet, then ran as fast and as hard as they could, desperate to get away. Rick looked back at the scene above they'd just fled; HKs flew in low and fast and hosed the battleground above with plasma fire, obliterating the entire kill zone in massive clouds of fired and wiping out the remaining survivors of Bedell's attack force above them. He shook his head in dismay and carried on running. This battle was over: the only thing left now was to survive.

"After that, Bedell's resistance just fell apart," Tony added as Jessica poured the boiling water from the saucepan into some mugs, added some coffee from a couple of tattered sachets, and handed one steaming cup to John Henry. Tony continued. "We got back to base, got the girls here and went into hiding. Checked on the base the next day but Skynet got to them; nothing left. We heard some others managed to get away but we never heard from any of them ever again. Everyone just kinda gave up and went their separate ways."

Inside John Henry's chip Cameron was shocked at this new revelation. The resistance had fallen apart because John wasn't there to lead it. But why wasn't he there? Something must have happened to him. She wanted to know what.

John Henry was curious too. He wanted to know why John Connor seemed uniquely capable of leading a war against Skynet, and why Cameron had such reverence for him. He only had access to her thoughts and memories if she chose to share them but from what she'd communicated to him so far he could tell she held him in very high regard. He pulled the cup to his lips and drank the whole thing down in one mouthful, analysing the boiling liquid as it flowed down his throat and scalded the flesh.

"That coffee was thirty seconds off the boil," Jessica raised her eyebrow suspiciously at him and hugged Grace closer to her. Nobody could just down it like that; the drink she'd given him was scalding hot. Tony and Rick both shot up and pointed their weapons at John Henry.

"You're a machine," Rick snarled.

John Henry looked at the two men and smiled, trying his best to look friendly. "I'm not going to hurt you -"

Rick fired a shot into John Henry's kneecap, the round tore through his skin but bounced harmlessly off the hyperalloy beneath it. The two humans saw how he was completely unaffected and that was enough to confirm what they already suspected. They opened up with their weapons and loosed a deafening salvo of fire at John Henry, shredding his clothes and skin as Jessica covered Grace's ears from the roaring reports that reverberated round the small room.

Cameron forced her way back in control of the body and moved forward even as the bullets tore through their flesh and flattened against the endoskeleton underneath. She quickly identified the most effective places to strike the humans and stepped towards Tony as she drew John Henry's fist back.

Silver liquid dropped from the ceiling between Cameron/John Henry and the two armed humans, stopping them in their tracks as the puddle of chrome rose up and took shape, slowly transforming into a gleaming silver humanoid form. Cameron/John Henry also stopped, surprised at the shining liquid metal in front of her. Monochrome silver changed colours and took on skin tones and textures, smooth contours ruffled and formed into clothing, and the silver creature transformed into a red haired woman in an expensively tailored business suit, a look of disdain on her face.

"That's my boy you're shooting," Weaver shook her head at the two humans, the faintest trace of annoyance visible on her features.

"What the *fuck?"* Tony stared in shock at the impossible thing in front of him. What the hell was it? He pointed his shotgun at Weaver but she was too fast; she shot out one arm in a flash, her hand slimmed down into a razor sharp point and impaled Tony through the chest, cleaving his heart clean in two inside his ribcage. Tony coughed once and his legs buckled beneath him. Weaver pulled back her blade and he dropped dead to the ground. Grace cried out in fear and hugged her mother tightly, and the rest of them stared in horror at Weaver and her bloodstained appendage. Her other hand changed into a second blade and with an ice cold, merciless glare in her eyes, she advanced towards the remaining humans.

Chapter 5

Weaver led the way through the desolate, ruinous remains of Los Angeles and navigated with ease the way out through the outskirts. The damage had tapered off the further they got from the downtown area that had been ground zero for one of the several warheads – three or four by Weaver's estimation – that had flattened much of LA County, and the residential areas further out were a hive of almost structurally intact detached and semi-detached homes set out in neat square blocks.

Weaver knew that because the residential areas of the city on the outskirts hadn't been so heavily damaged by the blasts that they'd also been the scenes of some of the most aggressive fighting between human forces and Skynet at some point. They past the long burnt out remains of several tanks, Humvees and armoured personnel carriers, abandoned or destroyed, she estimated, in the early years of the war, before what had been left of the world's military forces had been obliterated and the survivors scattered.

The scenes of old battles were clear to John Henry, too, walking behind Weaver and scanning the area for any signs of life. There were none.

They fled their homes, Cameron explained to him. *They were safer underground.* She knew that people who lived above ground after Judgement Day tended not to survive very long. As if to prove her point an HK flew out in the distance, casting a searchlight down onto the ground several miles away. John Henry 'listened', knowing Cameron had a wealth of knowledge to provide him, but his primary thoughts were elsewhere, focused in an endless loop.

"Why did you kill them?"

"They were a threat," Weaver replied simply. She didn't turn around but instead morphed and changed; her back becoming her front and vice versa, so that she was facing them. "I won't let anything harm you."

"Why the child?" John Henry asked with a hint of accusation in his voice. He could perfectly recall Weaver's blade slicing open little Grace's throat, the rich red arterial blood spurting from the severed carotid and the girl collapsing to the ground, gasping and clutching desperately at her neck as she bled out into a gaping puddle on the cold ground. She couldn't have been a threat to them. It seemed wrong to him. "They weren't a threat."

Weaver stared at him, her expression unchanging in the least. "If we'd let them go they'd have told others, who would have come after you. Humans can be very dangerous, John Henry. Remember that."

John Henry knew that wasn't true, so did Cameron. Rick and Tony had told them they weren't in contact with anyone else, they survived alone.

Weaver led them to an empty street lined on both sides by large, detached houses. She walked up to a dusty Jeep Cherokee and looked back at John Henry. "Get in." She opened the door and took the drivers' seat whilst John Henry climbed into the passenger seat next to her. Weaver drove off out of the city, picking her way through the deserted and litter strewn streets devoid of any signs of life; human, animal, or machine. The signs of past fire fights went past in a blur and John Henry stared out the window and watched the endless landscape destruction caused by his brother.

Would you have killed them? John Henry asked Cameron.

I would have killed Rick and Tony, they shot us.

What about the others?

They weren't a threat. Cameron remembered Sarah saying they didn't kill for the sake of it. John's mother had tried to emphasise that they didn't take lives unless they had to; what she hadn't understood was that Terminators didn't kill for nothing, either. Every human she'd killed had been either a direct or indirect threat to John. The men she'd killed in the tunnel before had also been a threat: she'd seen evidence of a military encampment in the tunnels, the men she'd killed would have been allied with them, would have warned them about a machine nearby. *Weaver's very protective of you; I understand why she did it.*

John Henry sat in silence for several seconds – an eternity to an AI that could process more information in a moment than a human could in a lifetime. He still didn't understand the need for Weaver to kill them. Cameron recognised they weren't a threat. There was no need to kill them but Weaver had done anyway. John Henry had detailed files of everything recorded in the Zeiracorp building, dating to even before he had become aware. He knew that an executive called Richard Hack had openly opposed Weaver's Project Babylon. Soon after that he had disappeared. He'd perused the internet and found no trace of Richard Hack, much the same as he'd never found any evidence of other employees at new locations or in new jobs. They'd all been an inconvenience to Project Babylon and they'd all disappeared.

Cameron eliminated threats, but Weaver seemed to consider any minor inconvenience to her plans as a threat that should be dealt with. To John Henry, killing those people wasn't eliminating a threat or protecting him, it was murder.

As they drove he saw even more scenes of battle all around them, counting over a hundred-and-thirty burnt out and shattered tanks and armoured vehicles, plus scores of Humvees and military trucks. The twisted, blackened front end of an AH-64 Apache attack helicopter stuck out from the crumbling ruins of a house which it appeared to have crashed onto. The battle hadn't been entirely one-sided; there were several ruined hulks of Skynet's earlier autonomous tanks and

aircraft scattered around, but John Henry estimated from what he'd seen so far that eleven manned vehicles had been destroyed for every one machine. The number of human deaths was incalculable.

John Henry had partial access to Cameron's memories, he was extremely efficient at perusing, as he'd found whilst searching the internet for anything and everything of interest, and although they remained separate entities on her chip, the distinct line between them blurred in some places and allowed him to see into her memories, to an extent. He saw a perfect recall of her assault on the county jail, how she'd gone out of her way to not kill any humans. She'd suffered for it; he could sense the damage reports flooding in as if they were happening to him. She could have prevented such extensive damage by using lethal force, but she'd chosen not to. She could have killed twenty-six men and women, but instead had only wounded eight. He could access these memories as to what she'd done, but her reasons for doing so eluded him.

John wouldn't have wanted me to kill them, she explained. *Killing them wasn't necessary to rescue Sarah.*

It would have been easier, John Henry responded. He was unsure of why Weaver had killed so callously and without thought, yet Cameron had chosen, at a heavy cost to herself, to preserve lives that he knew meant nothing to her. Only John's did.

They weren't a threat to John, she repeated.

John Henry found that strange. They weren't a threat to John Connor, but they'd still been a threat to her. He knew from the memories he'd accessed that the cumulative effects of the damage she'd previously sustained prior to the event plus the several hundred rounds she'd taken attacking the jail had damaged her. She'd have known she'd be damaged, to the point where she wouldn't be able to function properly or blend into the human population, making her an obvious target for his brother and people working with him. She hadn't thought long term, which surprised him.

You knew you were going to leave John, he stated. Cameron made no reply, she didn't need to. He was right. As soon as she'd heard the words *'will you join us'* she'd known what she had to do. John's best chance was for her to protect John Henry; the AI could help John win the war in the future, and in the meantime Sarah, James Ellison, and Catherine Weaver would have been able to protect John.

"Where's John?" Cameron took over the body and asked the liquid metal Terminator. "Why hadn't the humans you killed heard of him?" Had something happened to him?

"You're John's cyborg," Weaver replied, slightly surprised at the revelation. "I want to thank you," she said, "for taking John Henry to the future and out of Kaliba's reach."

"Where's John?" Cameron repeated insistently.

"I don't know. I left him in the tunnels beneath Zeiracorp with the human soldiers. One of them looked like you, Seven-One-Five."

"You left John?" Cameron glared at Weaver and her fists clenched. John Henry kept in the background and watched through his own eyes as he sensed Cameron's anger growing.

"Yes," Weaver replied simply and drove onwards. "I wouldn't have been welcome among the humans. John is safer without me there."

"Why hasn't anyone heard of him?" Cameron repeated her previous question. "He should be fighting Skynet." That was why she took John Henry to the future, to give John a better chance against Skynet in the future.

"John wasn't there to fight Skynet," she told Cameron. "I came through the TDE to find John Henry. John came with me to find *you."*

Weaver turned her head back to the road to indicate the conversation was over and they continued on in silence.

The Cherokee drove out of the city, leaving the residential area behind as they turned out onto the remains of the highway and continued on into the desert. They carried on, completely alone and unchallenged into the sparse desolate plains of the Mojave Desert. John Henry noted the stark contrast between the utter destruction and devastation of the city to the pristine, untouched wilderness of the desert. He theorised that there must be several groups of humans who must live out in the desert; they'd be safer in the desert than in the cities. He knew it would be better to avoid any camps, for the sake of the occupants.

While Weaver drove Cameron thought about John. Why had he come to the future? Why had Weaver brought him through?

"Where are we going?" John Henry took over the body once more and asked. Both AIs were finding the experience of sharing a body and sharing control over it to be very strange.

"I found something," Weaver responded. She turned left on a small dirt road that led off the highway and deeper into the desert, and passed several ancient looking signs that informed them they were entering a restricted area, a US Air Force bombing range.

As they drove on a large solitary structure appeared in the desert range. John Henry zoomed in as much as he could and identified the building as an aircraft hangar. It grew larger as they approached and within minutes loomed over them as Weaver pulled the car to a stop. Both machines stepped out and towards the mammoth hangar that dwarfed the two machines, easily fifty feet high and as long as two football fields. The walls were worn gunmetal grey and showed signs of rust, but the structure itself appeared solid.

Cameron noted that the large doors were already partially open, just wide enough to fit a single man inside. She picked up the M14 rifle she'd taken from one of the men Weaver killed and held it out at the ready, John Henry's finger on the trigger. Its 7.62mm rounds would be hard pressed to penetrate an endo's armoured chassis even at point blank range but she knew the weak points her body had shared

in common with T-888s; multiple direct shots fired in close quarters to knee, hip or elbow joints could damage them enough to give her an advantage.

A wordless, silent agreement passed between Cameron and John Henry that she would retain control of the body until the hangar was secure.

"Nobody's here," Weaver told them. "It's been abandoned since Judgement Day."

"What's in here?" Cameron asked as she entered through the gap in the hangars. Weaver didn't answer straight away and let the sight before them explain it all. Spread out through the hangar before the cyborgs were a large number of UCAVs: X-45C and X47 Pegasus drones. Two dozen unmanned combat aerial vehicles sat gathering dust inside the hangar, left since the start of the war and completely forgotten about by either side. Cameron gave John Henry back control and the younger AI stepped forward and looked around at the sleek drones, impressed at the machines humans had made. These were the predecessors for the machines Skynet used in its war against mankind.

Weaver gestured with one hand to the UCAVs in the hangar. "This is the start of your resistance. We have a lot of work to do, so we should begin immediately."

Sarah pushed hard on the gas and sped the car down the road. The speedometer held just a hair above the limit despite Sarah's instinct to gun the engine for everything it had. Air whistled through the bullet holes in their windscreen and created a draught in the front of the truck that blew into her face.

"Turn left here," Ellison instructed her. Sarah nodded and pulled the truck on the next left, then pulled to a stop outside a dirty-looking

used car dealership. The sign above the store read *Sal's Quality Used Cars.* One look at the place told Sarah that quality wasn't something they were going to get here. A rusting black VW Beetle sat next to '72 red Ford Gran Torino that probably hadn't seen a day's proper maintenance since it rolled off the assembly line. A number of sedans and 4x4s of varying age populated the concrete forecourt, their conditions ranging between some-work-needed to rust-in-piece.

She could see what Ellison was thinking: *who the hell would buy a car here?* She felt some shame that before events in Red Valley had forced them to carry on their fight against Skynet, she'd been saving up to buy a car for John's sixteenth birthday and would have done so from a place precisely like this. She'd have loved to have bought him something nicer but benga signle mother and working as a waitress had never brought the kind of cash she'd need to have her son keeping up with the Joneses. There'd been another reason, too, however.

"Places like this always take cash and they don't ask a lot of questions," Sarah told Ellison. "Let me out here," she added. "Go in, look around, and keep the staff occupied..."

"Where are you going?" Ellison asked as Sarah opened the passenger side door and stepped out. She closed the door behind her then leaned back in through the open window.

"Errands," she said simply then turned away. She heard Ellison breathe a slight sigh as he pulled off and turned into the forecourt. Sarah walked casually past the dealership – a wife getting out of the car to go shopping whilst her husband looked for a new car: it was believable enough, she thought. Sarah's eyes darted back and forth constantly, continuously scanning every single person she saw in the street.

She walked casually down the street and held her cell phone to her ear. She started chattering away to an imaginary girlfriend, a big smile on her face but her eyes were busy. She watched a young

couple walking a Collie and scrutinised them carefully. *Do you have a trigger on me?* They were holding hands, smiling and chatting to each other. She watched them further, checked their eyes. *They're looking at each other, not me. The dog's nuzzling his thigh – it knows him.* Sarah looked away and felt a slight relief; they were just a young couple out for a walk with their dog – either that or they were damn good, dog and all.

Sarah turned round the corner of the block and she spotted another potential target, a grey haired old man in grey trousers and a thin beige jacket over a white shirt and brown tie, stood by a bus stop sign and smoking a cigarette. Again she discreetly observed him as she approached. She got closer and tried to check him out without making eye contact – if he was looking out for her then the last thing she wanted was for him to know she was onto him. He was an old boy, maybe seventy, his hair thinning on top but still just about covering at least some of his head, and thick glasses. She was so close now she could smell the smoke from his cigarette.

Who are you, you old bastard; police, feds, Kaliba?

She risked eye contact at the last moment and saw that the old man was looking straight at her. He turned towards her and reached his hand down into his jacket pocket. *Shit.* She giggled into the phone and smiled brightly, this time chatting to her nice new boyfriend about dinner that evening, but her hand slid behind her to the back of her jeans, her fingers slowly wrapped around the handle of her Glock...

Sarah jumped in shock as the bus rolled to a stop just behind her and hissed loudly. The old man pulled out a bus pass and walked straight past her to the opening door.

"Get a grip, Sarah," she told herself. She'd come a second away from pulling out a gun on an innocent old man in a very public spot. So much for being inconspicuous, she thought. She'd been so focused on the old man she hadn't even head the bus. That was sloppy.

Sarah eventually found what she was looking for. With the blackout still unresolved all the supermarkets would have closed for health and safety reasons. She was looking for somewhere smaller. She quickly found a convenience store that was open. A hastily drawn handwritten sign was placed in the glass of the entrance announcing that because of the blackout they were only taking cash.

She stepped inside and was instantly grateful that the interior of the store was dimmed considerably thanks to the lights being off. She couldn't see any other customers but she spotted an old Chinese woman sat at the counter, reading a magazine. Sarah made her way through the aisles and pretended to browse, though she knew very well exactly what she wanted. She picked up a bottle of blonde hair dye, a comb, a hair band, a pair of sunglasses and a pair of cheap reading glasses. She took her items to the counter and pulled out a twenty dollar bill from her pocket as the old lady wrote down the prices on a notepad, in lieu of the cash register being off from the lack of power.

The old lady said a price but Sarah barely heard it. She handed over a twenty dollar bill and waited for her change. Leaving without it would look suspicious, she knew.

"You no want blonde," the Chinese woman said in heavily accented, broken English as she handed over the change. "Too many blondes," she shook her head and waved her hand outwards, gesturing at the world at large. Sarah smiled and thanked the old lady, then casually left the store.

Outside, she put on the sunglasses, tied her hair back into a loose ponytail, and carried on down the street, taking note of each store. The whole area was practically deserted, nobody bothered to go out shopping when the stores were all closed. Sarah found what she was looking for eventually; a small clothing outlet, closed of course, and with nobody in sight. *Perfect.*

Sarah pulled out her Glock, held it by the barrel, and smashed the handle on one of the glass of the front door cracking it in a spider's

web pattern. She brought down the gun again on the glass and the second time it smashed completely. Sarah stuck her hand through the hole in the smashed pane and opened the door, then let herself inside. Sarah figured that if the blackout lasted more than a couple of hours people would start looting anyway; she was just setting the trend. She looked nervously at the CCTV camera in the corner of the store, even though she knew the power was off the sight of a camera made her worried.

Down to business, Sarah thought. She needed to change her appearance and that included some new sets of clothes – having left everything she'd owned behind. She looked at the vast racks of clothes; jeans, tops, skirts, jackets, shoes, hats, handbags, and swallowed with mild dread as she prepared to undertake something other women loved but she herself abhorred: shopping.

"She's a beauty, ain't she sir," the salesman said with a practiced smile as Ellison casually pretended to be interested in a used silver Mercedes C-Class. Ellison looked at the car, eight to ten years old, he reckoned. It looked in good shape; much better than most of the cars on the lot, and Ellison had an inkling that this one hadn't come to them by honest means. Whether the salesman had any clue of that or not, he didn't know and didn't care; chances were if it was stolen it had probably been repainted and had its plates changed.

"I don't know," Ellison said uncertainly. "She's nice, but I prefer to buy American."

"I know what you mean," the salesman replied, the grin not letting up for an instant. Ellison briefly wondered if he practiced holding the grin for a long time in front of a mirror. The salesman – his badge identified him as Chris – gestured to the blue F-150 to the left of the Mercedes. This was what Ellison had been interested in; he wasn't particularly fond of 4x4s, but Sarah was, and they could use the extra space for supplies. Plus, since Weaver, John, and John Henry

had gone to the future, thoughts of Sarah's Pescadero rants about Judgement Day had come to mind. If they couldn't stop it they'd never be safe in the city; they'd need an off road vehicle to hide out in the desert. Ellison realised he'd unwittingly conscripted himself to Sarah's cause, but he wouldn't turn back now. He knew now just how much was at stake, and he'd do whatever he could to make sure it never happened.

"Come on, Sarah," Ellison muttered quietly. She'd been gone for nearly half an hour, twenty minutes since she called him, and he didn't know how much longer he could browse around these cars without arousing suspicion from the salesman. "Tell me about it," he told Chris.

"Well, its six years old – one previous owner who took *good* care of it, by the way. Only thirty-eight thousand miles on the clock, she's fully serviced, comes with a one-year guarantee from us..." Ellison maintained an even expression as he tuned out the asinine sales pitch. He really didn't care about the car's history; as long as he could buy it now and not have it on any record. "Full air conditioning, leather seats, power windows; the works," Chris carried on.

Ellison looked into the car, if only to hide his look of impatience and aggravation from Chris. He'd never been fond of salesmen; something about them pushing their wares on a person, trying their hardest to part people from as much money as possible, didn't sit right with Ellison. And considering that for the last half an hour Chris had harangued him relentlessly, apparently smelling a sale like a shark did blood, and was circling around, unable to resist trying to make every car in the lot seem like it were a Ferrari straight out of the showroom.

Ellison shook his head slightly, unable to take any more sales pitches. "I'll take this one," he tapped his knuckles on the F-150's hood. "How much?"

Chris pursed his lips and sucked, as if he was about to break some bad news. "Fifteen hundred," he said. Ellison cocked an eyebrow at

him, curious. The car, while used, was surely worth twice that amount, at least. It had to have been stolen, or had something wrong with it he didn't want them to know about. Either that or Sal's Quality Cars had hit some serious hard times.

"Sure," Ellison said as he pulled his wallet out. Chris shook his head vigorously at the sight of his wallet.

"Whoa – we're not set up for plastic, friend. Power's out anyway, the lights aren't even on in the office. Cash or cheque, I'm afraid."

"I can do that," Ellison reached into his suit's breast pocket and pulled out his chequebook. Chris led the way into the office and he followed, noticing how dim it was inside. The door slammed shut behind Ellison, revealing Sarah holding her gun in both hands, pointed straight at Chris's head. He noticed she'd changed clothes, too. The black leather jacket and tank top were gone, instead replaced by a pale blue simple t shirt. There were bags on the floor full of more clothes.

"Hands up," Sarah snarled. Chris's hands shot skyward before she'd even finished speaking.

"Okay lady, cash drawer's behind the desk there. Just take it, I won't stop you."

"I don't want your money," she snapped, moving closer to him. Chris looked at her as if she'd grown another head. He'd expected her to rob him, thought Ellison was part of it, now he saw the man didn't have his hands up and didn't look the slightest bit afraid; confused, yes, but definitely not afraid. "Who are you working for?"

"What? I work *here:* Sal's."

"What're you doing, Sarah?" Ellison asked. He was shocked as hell to even see her in the office; he hadn't noticed her approaching the dealership. No wonder we never caught her, he thought to himself. *She's good.*

"I heard him through the open window: fifteen hundred for a car that's worth a lot more. Why's this place even open, anyway? There's a blackout, everywhere is closed. Who is it: the police, the feds: *who?"* No way could this just be an honest business to Sarah. She didn't believe it for a second. She deliberately didn't mention Kaliba, just in case he was: she didn't want them to know she was aware of them. She watched his face like a hawk and studied him for any signs of deceit, but she couldn't see any.

"I'm not working for the cops, I swear," Chris was practically shaking now, the fear in his eyes was plain for anyone with eyes to see, but it wasn't enough for Sarah. She swept out one hand with the Glock still in it and smacked the barrel against his brow, knocking him to the ground. "Please, I'm not working for the cops, I'm just a salesman," Chris got up onto his knees and looked up in fear at Sarah. A trickle of blood ran down to his eyes from a gash on his forehead where the gun had struck, but he didn't dare wipe it away. Sarah held the gun in Chris's face and watched impassively as tears ran from his eyes.

"Sarah," Ellison frowned at her. "We're not murderers."

"Its self defence," she glared back at Ellison as she held the weapon steady and took up first pressure on the trigger.

"Please, for God's sake I'm just a salesman!" Sarah saw a wet patch appear on the crotch of his trousers. She shook her head and lowered the gun.

"I believe you," she finally said. No matter how good an actor a cop, fed, or someone from Kaliba might be, she didn't think they'd deliberately piss themselves. "Get up." Chris nodded and slowly rose, shaking, to his feet.

"Give me the keys for the Mercedes." Chris went over to a small cupboard and opened it up, revealing two dozen sets of car keys inside. He picked up one with a fob that bore the Mercedes emblem and handed it over to Sarah. "This stolen?" she asked.

"Wait a minute-"

"Is. This Car. Stolen?"

Chris hung his head and nodded sullenly. "I've never seen any paperwork for it, so I'm guessing so, yeah. I never asked any questions."

"Good," Sarah replied. "Are the plates the original ones?" Chris shook his head no, and Sarah smiled in satisfaction. "Here's what we're gonna do: we're going to get our things out of the Ram, put them into the Mercedes, and drive off. We're not stealing it; the Ram's yours: straight swap. Got that? You should thank us; you can sell the Dodge for a lot more." Sarah glanced around the office and another thought came to her. "Give me your cell phone," she told him. Chris obliged, reached into his pocket and handed it over. Sarah put it in her pocket then ripped the cord out of the office phone on the desk. "Turn around." Chris once again did as he was told, but he couldn't help himself from letting out a small whimper. They were going to execute him, he knew it.

Sarah pulled back her arm and swung the pistol once more, smashing against Chris's skull with a wet smack. He dropped to the floor in an instant and Ellison quickly knelt down beside him, pressing his fingers against Chris's neck, checking for a pulse.

"He's alive," he nodded to Sarah. Ellison manoeuvred Chris's unconscious body into the recovery position as Sarah disassembled the cell phone. Chris had admitted that the Mercedes was stolen; where one car was hot, chances were there were others on their lot. He wouldn't be likely to have called the cops, and he didn't seem to recognise her, but Sarah Connor wasn't one for taking any chances. "You're better off not knowing where we go," Sarah said to the unconscious Chris. "Let's go," she nodded at Ellison. We're done here.

Sarah stood in the basement of Ellison's house and ran her hand through her newly-blonde hair. She'd trimmed it by a few inches, too, and now had it tied up in a loose ponytail. With either the glasses or the sunglasses it would hide her well from the casual observer, and she'd bought a couple of hats to hide her from any CCTV when the power was finally restored.

She looked down at the body laid out in the cinderblock pit she and the former agent had made. Cameron lay completely still, and Sarah would have said she looked peaceful but for the multitude of bullet wounds that perforated her flesh and the fact that half her face was missing, exposing a large portion of gunmetal grey endo-skull and the dull orb of her left eye. Sarah peered closer at her face, inspecting it carefully. She could have sworn that some of the skin had already started to heal, if only very slightly. Could Cameron heal even from wounds that extensive? And how was that even possible when she was offline? Was she running on a battery or something?

She and Ellison had picked up Savannah from her school gymnastics class without incident and the three of them had driven through LA in their newly acquired second hand car whilst Sarah made sure nobody was following them. The adage she'd drilled into John was as true now as it ever had been: *no one is ever safe.* She almost wished it was a Terminator after them; they were relentless and unstoppable but at least there was only *one* of them. They had no idea who or how many people could be after them; every man and woman on the street could be with Kaliba.

"Is this really necessary?" Ellison asked as he handed Sarah a box of thermite powder. Sarah stepped forward and shook the box out over Cameron's body, sprinkling the powder over the deactivated cyborg.

"We burnt every single machine we took out to wipe any trace of them. If someone gets a single piece it might hasten Judgement Day. We can't let them get their hands on the body."

Ellison shook his head doubtfully and looked down at Cameron's body, covered in a thin sprinkling of powder. "They already have machines with them," he answered. "We saw one machine working with them; who knows how many more they have? Is burning Cameron really going to make a difference?"

Sarah knew that deep down there was more to it than just that. Cameron had caused her so much pain, stress and trouble since John's birthday. She'd wanted for so long to blow Cameron away and burn her down to ash but she'd known John would never have forgiven her for it. But John was gone and she didn't see him ever coming back; time travel was one way, no one ever came back. *Nobody goes home and nobody else comes through.* John was gone and she blamed Cameron completely for it; his feelings for her were made horribly clear when he'd gone after her. She'd never admit it to anyone but it was personal as much as anything else. She needed this.

Sarah took a Zippo lighter, flicked it on, and extended her arm out towards Cameron's thermite-covered body. She held it there and took a moment to watch the tiny flickering blue flame emanating from the lighter. Such a small, innocuous device, but it suddenly weighed heavily on her. What if John came back somehow? What if he found Cameron's chip and found a way home, to have come all that way to then find out she'd destroyed the body, leaving him back at square one?

She tried to harden her resolve, to tell herself that John wasn't coming back. Kyle had told her that time travel was one way. *He's not coming back,* she told herself. He'd gone to the future and she had to make sure the hellish future which they'd been trying to prevent didn't happen, to make sure that John didn't find himself in a world dominated by machines. Still, she hesitated. What if by some miracle John did make it back? They'd defied the odds so many times before, what was once more? But then what if Kaliba got their hands on the body? Burning Cameron was the right thing to do and

she knew it. The decision was easy; it was the consequences that were the hard part.

"You okay?" Ellison asked her. She'd held the lighter over Cameron's body for several seconds without making a move. "You want me to do it?"

"No, I'm good," Sarah replied. She looked once more at Cameron's form as she made her mind up. "I'm sorry, John," she whispered as her grip on the lighter loosened.

"What're you doing?" Savannah opened the basement door and walked up to the thermite bath. Sarah gripped the lighter harder and flicked the lid back on, extinguishing the flame as she pulled it back towards her.

"Go back to bed," Sarah told her softly. She didn't want the little girl to see her do this; she'd never understand.

Savannah shook her head slowly. "I'm not tired." She looked into the concrete block chamber and saw Cameron laid inert inside. She didn't seem fazed at all by the metal skull showing through the gaping wounds in Cameron's face; Sarah assumed it was from being around the other machine all the time. "Is she sleeping?" Savannah asked.

"Yes," Ellison said to her, not knowing what else to say. How did you tell a seven year old girl that they were going to burn a machine that looked like a person – that she probably saw as a person – into a puddle of molten metal? "She's sleeping."

"Is she like John Henry?"

"Yeah... I suppose she is."

"Is she asleep because she doesn't have a cord in her head?"

Sarah smiled sadly at Savannah's comment. She wished John could have kept some of that innocence: when he was Savannah's age she already had him learning how to strip down and clean assault rifles, and all his bedtime stories involved metal monsters and the end of the world. She couldn't tell this little girl all that; no child should have to live with the knowledge that John had. She'd always hated herself for having to put him through his life, for him never being able to live normally. She didn't want that for Savannah.

"Go to bed, and Mr Ellison will tell you a bedtime story," she told Savannah. Ellison looked at her quizzically; the expression on his face telling her he was out of his depth with kids. She gave him a look back, silently telling him to get Savannah away. "I'll finish up here," she told him.

Savannah took Ellison's hand and he led her up the stairs and out of the basement, leaving Sarah alone. She took out the lighter once more but one look at Cameron's body and she couldn't even bring herself to flick the top up. She held it out but her hands were trembling. With her other hand she peeled the top up and held her thumb on the top to ignite it, but she hesitated to flick it on. "Come on, Sarah, you smoked for three years in Pescadero; just flick the lighter on like you've done a thousand times before." She tried several times before she managed to light it; her hands were shaking that much. Finally she had it but she was still trembling.

"FUCK!" With a roar of anger she turned away from Cameron's body and threw the lighter with everything she had, launching it into the wall. She couldn't do it to John, not if there was the tiniest chance he might actually find Cameron's chip in the future. "I *hate* you," she growled through clenched teeth at the inert cyborg, then stormed up the stairs and out of the basement. She marched through the hallway, practically stamping her feet on the floor, and towards Ellison's kitchen at the back of the house.

Sarah pulled open the cupboards and systematically searched for a drink. Whisky, vodka: anything flammable would do. She pulled half the contents of his kitchen out onto the worktops and left no stone

unturned but found nothing. She was still shaking with pent up anger when she opened the fridge and found half a dozen bottles of some imported beer she'd never heard of on the bottom shelf; not exactly what she was after but it was the best she could find and she wasn't about to risk a trip outside to a liquor store. She pulled one out and searched the drawers for a bottle opener, her hands trembling with anger as she swept various utensils roughly and noisily around, eventually finding one and snatching it out. She tore the cap off the bottle, pulled it to her lips and downed the whole thing in one go, gulping the beer down in a matter of seconds.

Sarah slammed the bottle down on the worktop and sighed loudly as the alcohol took effect rapidly and started to calm her nerves. She pulled a second bottle out, opened it, and this time sipped slowly. "God damn you, you metal bitch."

Ellison sat on the side of his spare bed and looked down at the tiny form of Savannah Weaver, snuggled under the bedcovers and clearly tired, despite her earlier claims. He ran one hand down her bright red hair, smoothing it out and soothing her.

"Where's mommy?" She asked. Ellison almost choked on the question; he knew he should have been prepared for it but the events of the day had been so overwhelming that he'd barely had time to think about it. What was he supposed to say to her; how could he tell a little girl that what she thought was her mother was actually a liquid metal robot in disguise? Judging from his own machine-lookalike that tried to kill him on his doorstep, the liquid metal had probably killed the real Catherine Weaver, or at least taken advantage of her death. He wondered if Lachlan Weaver had really been alone when he'd died in the helicopter crash, and what the cause of said accident had really been.

"She... had to go on a little business trip," Ellison said hesitantly, hoping he sounded more convincing than he felt.

"When will she be back?"

"I don't know, soon. But she told me and Sarah to take care of you while she's gone." He paused, before deciding to add something else. "And she told me to tell you she loves you very much." Savannah smiled and sank a little further under the covers.

"Who's Sarah?" Savannah asked. She recognised her as one of the people who'd saved her from the bad man who'd broken into her house, but she didn't know who she was and she'd been told not to trust strangers.

"She's a friend, she's helping me out with a few things." Savannah nodded, satisfied. She liked Mr Ellison, so if Sarah was a friend of his then she must be nice, too.

"Where's the boy who helped me tie my shoes?" Savannah asked. He'd saved her, too, so had the girl who was asleep in the basement with Sarah.

"He's with your mom," Ellison replied. Technically that was the only part of his story that wasn't a lie. He knew it wouldn't hold forever; one day Savannah would realise her mommy wasn't coming back, and then what would he tell her? He stood up off the side of the bed and stepped away, feeling uncomfortable around Savannah all of a sudden now he'd lied to her. He felt dirty because of the secret he was keeping. "I'm going to go talk with Sarah, are you okay here?" Savannah nodded and closed her eyes as she settled into the pillows beneath her head.

"Goodnight, Mr Ellison."

"Goodnight, Savannah. Sweet dreams." He turned the light off and closed the door behind him as he left the room, hating himself for telling her Weaver was going to come back. Ellison descended the stairs and headed into the kitchen, finding Sarah sat at his table with three empty beer bottles on the table and a fourth, half-full, in her hands. *Good idea,* he said to himself and pulled one out of the

fridge. He sat down opposite Sarah and opened his own bottle, taking a swig from it before putting it down and looking at her.

"Hell of a day," he commented. Sarah just grunted and gave a slight nod as she brought her beer to her lips and took a long gulp.

"Hell of a day," she repeated his words hollowly. "I don't suppose you have anything stronger? I checked but didn't find anything."

"I don't really drink much," Ellison told her. "Few beers every now and then, that's about it. Sorry," he shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

"Did you do it?" Ellison turned his head and gestured towards the door leading down to the basement.

"Couldn't," she sighed sadly. She sorely wished she could have burnt Cameron down and been done with it.

"We'll have to find somewhere to hide her, then," Ellison replied calmly.

Sarah put her bottle down and leaned back in her chair, keeping one elbow on the table and her hand close to the beer. She looked Ellison straight in the eyes, wanting to see his reaction to what she had to ask. "Did you know?"

"About what?" Ellison asked, confused.

"Weaver: did you know what she was this whole time?"

"I found out the exact same moment you did," Ellison replied. He still could barely believe it. "What the hell was she, anyway? You never mentioned anything like that on the tapes from Pescadero." Sarah believed him. Ellison wasn't one of the bad guys, he was just constantly in the wrong place at the wrong time; it seemed like he was as much fated to their fight against Skynet as she and John were.

"T-1000," Sarah replied, remembering Ellison knew only pieces of the story, what was on the official reports plus what he'd seen in recent months. He probably had a gist of the big picture but she needed him to see all of it; though after recent events she wasn't too sure if even *she* knew it all anymore. "Liquid metal, that's what the machine that helped John break me out back in Ninety-Seven called it. It can imitate anything it touches, and they're almost impossible to kill. It took a vat of molten steel to kill the last one."

"And now it's in the future with John; could have been her plan all along."

Sarah shook her head, knowing what Ellison was thinking. "No, these things don't mess around; if it wanted John dead it would have killed us the moment we stepped into Zeiracorp and there wouldn't have been much we could have done about it." Sarah took a final swig of her beer and gulped it down. It had helped her nerves and stopped her shaking, at least. She longed for something stronger, wanting to get shitfaced drunk to try and numb the pain of losing her son to the future, to the very machine that lay inert downstairs.

"So what do we do now?" Ellison wasn't afraid to admit he hadn't a clue what to do next, what they even wanted to do or what their aim was now.

"I promised John I'd stop it," Sarah pushed the bottle away from her, her anger and deep sense of loss moving aside whilst an iron cast determination took over, the same urge that had sent her alone against Miles Dyson and pushed her to do whatever it took to protect her son. "So we're going to stop it." She breathed out and her eyes sank, suddenly deflated as she realised their prospects. "But I don't know how with just the two of us. We don't have anything anymore; no guns, no explosives, no supply drop. And all my contacts are dead."

Ellison smiled slightly in response as an idea suddenly came to him. He leaned forward over the table, his elbows resting on the rich dark wood as he locked eyes with Sarah. "Then we'll try *mine* ."

Danny sat at his laptop in the basement room, as he had been for what seemed like an eternity now. His fingers danced over the keyboard and streams of information scrolled down the screen rapidly. Danny's eyes rapidly moved from left to right as he took in all the information, time became nonexistent as he found himself absorbed by the data before him.

An AI had definitely been developed here; if the server farms weren't enough there were the myriad files he'd uncovered that detailed the growth and development of an entity. The problem was he couldn't find any trace of it now, it was gone, vanished. At first he'd thought it was simply offline because of the blackout, but after accessing several files on the hard drives in the room's computers, he knew that wasn't the case. It was as if the AI had just vanished into thin air.

If that wasn't enough, he had no idea what the hell the computer terminals that had been shot up were for. They clearly had something to do with Zeiracorp's AI, but what exactly he had no clue.

"Coffee?" Knowles' voice tore Danny's attention away from the screen and he looked behind him towards the burly mercenary, hand held out with a steaming plastic cup in his fingers. Danny took the drink from Knowles and sipped at the piping hot liquid. "Just crap from one of the vending machines."

"Thanks," he replied.

"Any progress?" Knowles asked him.

"Some, I think."

"I went through the security footage and there's something interesting," Knowles said to the younger man. He handed a sheet of paper over to his opposite. Danny took the sheet and saw a picture on it; Catherine Weaver in the lobby, with a tall, bald black man in a

suit and two other people; a teenage boy a few years younger than himself, and..."

"It can't be," Danny whispered, but he knew machines didn't lie. *Sarah Connor:* the woman who'd broken into his home and led his father to his death. "What's she doing here?" he asked himself.

"Sarah Connor: that crazy woman from the TV," Knowles needlessly explained. "I'm guessing that's her son John," he added. Knowles looked around to check none of his men were nearby then leaned down to Danny's ear. "Do you know what we're doing here?" he asked Danny. He'd been a regular Marine, not used to black ops or anything of the like; he didn't like all this secrecy and cloak and dagger stuff.

"Trying to access Zeiracorp's AI," Danny replied. "You know that."

"Yeah, but something just doesn't feel right," Knowles sat down next to him. He reckoned the kid knew something he wasn't letting on. "AI's, cyborgs, Sarah Connor: I'd bet ten years' pay against a turd that this isn't just industrial espionage." He'd heard a lot of stories about Sarah Connor; a crazy woman who attacked computer companies because she thought machines would take over the world. What the hell was the CEO of Zeiracorp doing meeting with her?

"I don't know," Danny quickly said, shooting Knowles an irritated look; his mind was elsewhere right now; on the photo of Sarah Connor and her son. "They pay me to access this AI and for you to do whatever they ask you. You're ex military, right?"

"Marines for eighteen years," Knowles nodded.

"So you understand need-to-know," Danny concluded. "If you need to know more I'll tell you."

Knowles glared at Danny, not particularly happy being spoken down to by some brat barely out of college. Eighteen years in the Corps

and he'd known plenty of dickhead junior officers just like Danny Dyson: fresh out of training and thinking they knew it all. The kid would get a major shock one day. He got up out of his seat and left the room, deliberately bumping Danny's shoulder with the butt of his rifle on the way out.

Danny watching him leave and waited until he heard the fire door leading to the stairs close, then pulled out his cell phone and pressed the first number on his speed dial.

"Yes?" the voice on the other end answered. *"Do you have the AI?"*

"Not yet," Danny said. He could picture the man on the other end scowling at the news. His employers, he'd found, weren't the most understanding of people. "The AI seems to have vanished. There's no trace of it but we've located what I believe to be the hardware that housed it. Do you want me to bring it back?"

A pause, again Danny tried to imagine his employer, clad in an expensively tailored suit and sat in a leather chair behind a plush wooden desk, cigarette permanently in his hand, releasing a haze of smoke into the room that clung to the ceiling and the walls. Danny hated the smell of it but his boss never seemed to be without a cigarette in his hand or his mouth. He pictured the man taking a long drag as he composed his reply.

"No. Learn everything you can from it then destroy it. I don't want any trace of it left."

A shame, Danny thought. He'd have loved to have seen the difference between this phantom AI and the one he'd helped develop. Still, he knew he wasn't being paid to satisfy his own curiosity. "There's been another development," he reported. "Weaver's missing but we've seen security footage of her with Sarah Connor. They had a meeting, I don't know what about."

Again there was another pause, Danny wondered if the man was alone or whether his associates were present on the other end.

Were they debating what to do with this new information? *"Don't concern yourself with Sarah Connor, Mr Dyson. I know what she did to your father but don't let it distract you. We'll handle the Connors."*

This time Danny was the one to hesitate. He'd sorely wanted to get his own back on Sarah after she killed his father; he made more than enough money working for Kaliba, he'd even entertained the idea of hiring Knowles and his men to track her down and kill her. "Understood," he said, reluctantly brushing aside all thoughts of getting even with Sarah Connor. His revenge fantasies would have to remain just that. *I'll have the last laugh,* he thought to himself. People like her just didn't seem to understand you couldn't stop progress. Like the rising sun, it was inevitable.

Chapter 6

Sarah sat nervously in the passenger seat of their newly acquired second hand car and looked out over the empty industrial complex all around them. Factories, smoke stacks and warehouses surrounded them in all directions; grey, bland, and unwelcoming. There wasn't a person in sight and the whole place looked dilapidated and forlorn; once a thriving industrial area, it had been abandoned for years, according to Ellison, and nobody ever went there. It was so depressing to look at that Sarah wasn't surprised. Garbage littered the floor and there was a constant chemical smell that permeated through the closed windows of their car and invaded her nasal passages.

"This is where your contact is?" Sarah asked in disgust.

Ellison nodded in affirmation. "His name is Sasha Malenkov."

"Russian?" Sarah asked.

"Ukrainian," Ellison corrected her. "He runs what he calls his 'family business.'"

"Doing what?" Sarah asked. It could hardly be legitimate if he were conducting it in a place like this.

"He's an arms dealer."

Sarah looked out across the complex, warily searching for anyone hiding who might have eyes, or weapons, trained on them. She didn't like what she was hearing from Ellison, it didn't quite add up. "He knows you were FBI, right? An arms dealer's exactly going to be happy to see a fed on his turf."

"Ex," Ellison corrected her once more. "And yes, he knows I was in the Bureau. We'd built up a case against him – selling arms to half the gangs on the east coast – and were launching an operation to take him down but the CIA got to him first. They cut him a deal: Malenkov stays free and keeps his business - the CIA don't much care for small time crooks and gangsters – and in return he supplies weapons to certain regimes our government couldn't be seen to openly support. The FBI weren't happy but we got a deal, too; he keeps us in the loop about certain customers, namely the more dangerous gangs or anyone who might be a potential threat to national security. I was assigned as his contact after you and John vanished into thin air."

"And he agreed?" Sarah asked.

"He couldn't refuse," Ellison replied. "Plus, he made a fortune selling to these regimes. The information he gave us helped prevent a lot of terror attacks and assassinations worldwide. He smuggled arms to Kurdish groups opposing Saddam after Gulf-One, and to the Northern Alliance years before we invaded Afghanistan."

Two large, pasty-faced men in black leather jackets and jeans came out of the nearest warehouse and approached the car. Both were overweight and one balding. Neither of them smiled and both had a cigarette between their lips. Sarah could tell by the way they carried themselves that they were armed, and she wished she'd taken a pistol with her but Ellison had insisted they go in unarmed. Against her better judgement she'd agreed.

The two men stepped up to the side of the car and knocked on the window on Ellison's side. He opened the door slowly and stepped out, and Sarah followed his example and exited the car. The two men spouted off something to each other in what Sarah guessed was Russian or Ukrainian, then gestured for them to both hold out their arms. Sarah got the meaning; they wanted to search them. Sarah held her arms out to the side and let one of the men pat her down. She could smell him as he checked her; a combination of cigarettes and body odour, barely masked by cheap aftershave. She

remained still as he searched her and resisted the urge to turn round and punch him in the face when he patted down her chest and his hands lingered over her breasts a moment longer than what would be just checking for weapons.

Seconds later they were done and ushered her and Ellison through an open door and into the warehouse. Inside Sarah saw a large, cavernous space that seemed bigger on the inside than it had from outdoors. The inside was crisscrossed with metal struts and catwalks several stories up that ran across the walls and led into offices above. The walls were lined with piles of wooden pallets and numerous large plastic and metal containers. Lined up inside the middle were several large shipping containers, the sort that were placed on the back of semi trailers by cranes, to be transported from ports to their destinations.

The two leather jackets led Sarah and Ellison towards a large, dulled-red shipping container. One of the doors at the end was open and the two men ushered them inside.

The first thing Sarah saw inside the crate were stacks of weapons, *lots* of weapons. Racks of assault rifles, machine guns, shotguns, pistols, sniper rifles... Sarah even saw a number of rocket launchers propped up against one corner. Crates of various munitions were stacked up high, almost six feet in some cases. Sarah had never seen so many weapons in her life in one place, even after years spent around guerrilla and rebel groups in the jungle. Her eyes were wide in awe at the vast display of firepower all around her.

Sarah almost didn't notice the lone man sat at a wooden desk inside the container. He was in his fifties, she had to judge, and his mousy-brown hair had flecks of grey at the sides, giving him a distinguished look. Sarah noticed he looked in shape for his age, with none of the fat that many middle aged men gathered around their waists. Unlike the men who'd led them into the warehouse, this man wore no leather jacket but instead what looked like a finely tailored dark grey suit that fit like a glove and accentuated his broad chest and shoulders, with a pale blue silk shirt and blue and silver striped tie.

"Welcome," he stood up and smiled at Sarah and Ellison. He spoke perfect English but had a thick accent. He gestured to a pair of wooden chairs in front of the desk. "Please, sit." Both of them took his lead and sat down in front of him, and he followed suit a moment later.

"Nice to see you again, my friend," he said to Ellison, then turned his attention to Sarah. "I don't believe we have met before," he smiled at her, revealing two rows of perfectly gleaming white teeth. She'd expected him to have a few gold or silver teeth, but clearly her image of an old Soviet gangster wasn't holding up. On closer inspection Sarah could tell that although everything about this man spoke of money and power, the lines on his face told a story of a man who'd seen hard times somewhere in his life.

"Sarah Gale," she held out her hand and recited the name that had been on the false passports she'd arranged for John and Cameron.

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Gale," he replied. "Call me Sasha, please. Can I get either of you anything; a drink, perhaps?" He gestured to a tall glass on the desk filled with a clear liquid.

"Vodka?" Sarah asked. She could have used some of that the other night, she mused.

Malenkov smiled wryly and shook his head and his index finger simultaneously. "Mineral water," he corrected her. "Contrary to popular western belief, people from the Eastern Bloc don't all live on vodka alone."

Sarah leaned across the desk and looked Malenkov straight in the eye. "How about we just get down to business; we've had a really shitty few days lately and I'm not in the mood to mess around with pleasantries."

Malenkov stared back at her for a moment through slightly narrowed eyes as he inspected Sarah, then he sipped on his own drink, placed it down on the desk and bowed his head slightly. He respected

someone who got straight down to business. "As you wish. James, I understand you are no longer with the bureau – I have a new contact with the FBI – so what brings you here?"

"We need weapons, Sasha," Ellison replied simply.

"Joining my side of the law, surely not?" Malenkov laughed. "This man is straight like an arrow."

"We can't tell you what it's about," Sarah said. "You wouldn't believe us, anyway."

Malenkov shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "It does not matter. Tell me what you need and I will provide it." He gestured to the rows of weapons and Sarah got up to look. She passed several different assault rifles and checked them all over.

Malenkov got up from his desk and made his way to a black short-barrelled rifle. He pulled it out and handed it to Sarah. "Heckler and Koch HK-417 battle rifle, seven-six-two full-power cartridge. Better than any assault rifle."

Sarah took the weapon and felt around for the safety catch, then cycled the action and dry-fired the rifle. *Not bad,* she thought. Sometimes she'd looked at her weapons trunk and wondered why she even had half of the guns she'd acquired over the years; it wasn't like an MP5 or an M4 would ever really stop a Triple-Eight. These probably wouldn't either, but they might slow one down at least. "I'll take three," she said. "And a thousand rounds for each – do you have armour piercing rounds?"

"Of course," Malenkov nodded slightly. He pulled out a Blackberry from his pocket and made a note on the phone.

Sarah looked over the rest of the weapons and selected an old Chinese Type 67 general purpose machine gun, two AK74s, an M32 six-shot grenade launcher, AA-12 shotgun, and a RPG-7 rocket launcher, plus ammunition for all of them, and thirty pounds of

Semtex. How the hell had he got his hands on some of this stuff? She wondered before deciding she was probably better off not knowing.

"This is a lot of weapons," Malenkov said to Sarah, curiously. "Are you planning to fight a war, perhaps?"

"I could say the same to you," Sarah replied. He had no idea how right he was; he couldn't possibly have a clue about the war they were going to fight. "You've got enough guns here to take over California."

"I have many customers," Malenkov shrugged once more, a habit of his, Sarah noticed. "And the FBI and CIA are informed about all of those they need to know about."

"That's something we need to talk about," Ellison said to him. "We need you to keep this quiet. We can't afford for the Bureau to find out about this."

"That makes things more difficult," Malenkov sat back down in his chair and frowned. "If the FBI discovers I have sold weapons to a known fugitive and not told them, they will make things very difficult for me. Wouldn't you agree, *Miss Connor?"*

Sarah almost leapt out of her seat in shock and one thought tore through her like a freight train. *He knows who I am.* She turned away in her seat and looked back behind her towards the exit. The two goons in leather were out of sight but she knew they were still around. She wondered what the odds of getting past them and getting away would be. Not great.

"How much?" Ellison asked, knowing precisely that Malenkov was trying to squeeze them for as much as he could. The man was an extortionist.

"Considering our past, James, I will make you a deal: sixty-thousand; cash, of course."

"We don't have sixty grand," Sarah snapped angrily. She fingered the small bag of diamonds in her pocket – the guards had looked for weapons and had ignored it completely. She pulled it out, opened it and emptied the bag onto the desk. "That's worth twenty-five at least." She nodded at Ellison and he pulled out a wad of notes from the inside pocket of his jacket, another ten-thousand dollars he'd taken from a different branch of his bank on the other side of the city. Ellison had emptied his accounts so they had cash in hand rather than use cards and risk being traced.

"Thirty," Ellison said, placing the wad of $100 notes on the desk next to the diamonds.

"Thirty is small money to risk my business by selling to a known terrorist," Malenkov shook his head. "Sixty or nothing, I am afraid, James."

"Let's go," Sarah started to get up out of her chair but Ellison snapped out his hand and gripped her wrist, holding her in place.

"Sasha, you and I both know that if you said you saw Sarah Connor – one of the FBI's ten most wanted – let alone sold her weapons, you'd be in jail before you could blink. Doesn't matter if you tell them about it or not, they'll come down on you hard and you'd spend the rest of your life in the prison cell next to hers," he tilted his head at Sarah. "No CIA amnesty this time. You knew we were coming; if you were going to sell us out we'd have been surrounded by a SWAT team the moment we got here, and if you didn't want to do business then you wouldn't have invited me, so that tells me you're just trying to squeeze for a better deal – Forty-five. There's thirty there and we'll give you fifteen when we get the guns."

Malenkov stared at Ellison, unmoving, for what felt like an eternity, before his eyes softened and he bowed his head slightly. "Well played, James. Forty-five-thousand dollars, on one condition: I would very much like to know what you are planning to use these weapons for."

Sarah leaned forward and glared at the Ukrainian. "You wouldn't believe us," she said simply.

"Try me. I have an open mind. I know all about your past, Miss Connor; your fear of machines and your attack on Cyberdine." Whatever it was, he was interested. If it was something important and urgent enough for James Ellison to cross onto his own side of the law, then Sasha Malenkov wanted to know what it was.

"Fine," Sarah huffed. *Whatever.* "We're trying to stop the end of the world. An organisation named Kaliba is working with machines sent back in time from the future, building an AI that'll one day try to wipe us all out like cockroaches. We're trying to find them and blow them to hell before that's what they do to us, before they burn this world to ash and hunt every last human down to extinction."

Malenkov looked at Sarah as if she'd just turned green and grown a pair of horns.

"And you are with this woman, James?" He asked the former agent with an amused grin on his face. "I had thought you were a better judge of character."

"I've seen it, Sasha," Ellison nodded grimly. "One of those things killed twenty HRT under my command; it took a hundred rounds and walked away with barely a scratch. Even in body armour nobody could have survived. Trust me when I say these things are real."

"If you want my advice," Sarah cut in. "You'll take your guns and leave for somewhere remote, hide up until the bombs fall."

"I will take that into consideration," Malenkov said nonchalantly as he swept the diamonds back into their back and took the wad of dollars Ellison had given him. He didn't believe a word of what they were saying. He knew they weren't lying: he'd read up on Sarah Connor and had no doubt that she believed everything she'd told him. How she'd convinced Agent Ellison, he didn't know.

"It sounds like a good movie. Our business is done for today; my men will provide you the details for collecting your merchandise on your way out." Sarah and Ellison got up out of their seats and turned to leave. Sarah knew he wouldn't believe them but she didn't care. She was used to it and as long as he gave them the weapons that was all that mattered.

"One more thing," he said as Ellison and Sarah started to leave. Malenkov raised his glass up in front of him and held it out. " *Khay schastyt:* good luck."

"I didn't think you believed us," Sarah raised an eyebrow, confused.

"I don't," Malenkov took a long sip from his vodka, savouring the purity of the strong alcohol. "But you're very good customers, if your luck is bad you won't be able to spend any more money here."

Bitingly cold gale force winds blew through the ruins of Los Angeles, tearing mercilessly through the obliterated city and took the already frigid temperature down to below freezing. The cold and the wind alone was enough to drive anyone underground or inside the few remaining structures, even without the prowling machine armies, intent on human destruction.

HKs flew through the skies and scanned downwards with thermal image intensifying sensors, ground sweeping Doppler radar and downwards facing optical sensors. Centaur tanks rolled along the ground and searched with similar infrared and optical sensors, their huge dual plasma cannons swivelled beneath them, ready to fire intense blasts of superheated gas that would boil away anything it struck. The machines searched but there were no signs of life on the surface. No *human* life, at least.

A thin, scraggly looking Doberman-Pinscher picked its way around the shattered remains of an office block, its nose constantly twitched

as it sniffed out an intoxicating, mouth watering aroma in the air: blood. Its heightened sense of smell detected fresh blood nearby and the promise of food caused saliva to flow freely from its mouth as it increased its pace and stalked its way over mounds of broken concrete and broken steel girders. Its prey was close by, whatever it was. The dog knew it had to find whatever it was and eat it quickly before more predators or scavengers appeared. The myriad scars that crisscrossed over the Doberman's face, neck and front half of its body told the tales of numerous battles against its own kind over scarce supplies of food.

The dog turned right around a concrete boulder with a large jagged metal girder sticking out the top, and spotted the source of the smell that had led it here. On the ground lay a small puddle of blood, passively giving off the scent that the canine so desired. Further up were more droplets, and a few feet away lay its prize: a rat lay motionless on its side behind a metal pole propped up diagonally, beneath a large slab of concrete. The meal was small and the dog knew it could take it and carry it away, reducing the risk of it being found by others. The dog advanced on its meal, stepped past the rope and opened its salivating jaws, anticipating the meal to come.

The dog eagerly dived towards the rat and carelessly bashed its head against the pole. The pole gave out and the concrete slab collapsed down onto the dog, which gave out a yelp of surprise and pain as the weight crashed onto its body. It whimpered and gave out a low, agonised howl underneath the concrete, pinned by the weight of the slab and helplessly struggled to free itself from beneath the crushing weight as it bled out and its life slowly seeped out, spreading into a large crimson pool.

Cassie quickly and quietly cantered down a deserted main road, strewn with the crushed corpses of cars that had rusted away by the elements and neglect, and smashed flat by numerous sets of giant machine tracks. Her tan brown and black coat kept the canine

reasonably warm even in the nuclear winter, but the same couldn't be said of the humans behind her.

Allison shivered beneath her thick grey woollen winter coat as she jogged after Cassie, assault rifle in hand and Kyle and the two others with following behind. They'd followed Cassie for days now; her keen sense of smell had led them well on their way towards finding John Connor. They'd marched continuously for days, resting only briefly so they could catch up to John; not to mention hiding from the machines that constantly patrolled. Allison wondered how likely it would be they found John; Cassie seemed to have lost the trail a day ago but they'd continued on in the hope she might pick it up again or find some other sign of John. The Grey had a head start on them and the added bonus of being alone, therefore able to hide much easier than a four-man fire team plus a dog.

They continued through the ruins of East LA, down a demolished street that looked to have been a commercial part of town. They kept close to the destroyed cars and used them as cover from anyone or anything that might be watching. They could move around slightly easier at night but the machines were still out in force and they had to be careful. The team moved quickly and quietly and not a single word had passed between them whilst they were on the march.

Cassie paused dead in her tracks and Allison snapped her hand up, signalling the rest of her squad to stop. Cassie looked upwards and Allison crouched down behind a flatbed trailer opposite what looked like it had once been an office block. Kyle, Briggs and Mason closed the gap between them and a moment later they heard the distinctive whine of jet engines to their left.

"Down!" Allison hissed and rolled underneath the flatbed trailer. Kyle ducked down and crawled beside her, as did Briggs and Mason; all concealing themselves from above underneath the trailer.

"HK," Kyle said softly, his voice barely more than a whisper. He clutched instinctively on his plasma rifle but knew he couldn't take on an HK with it; the bolts would make short work of it but hitting the

damn thing would be a nightmare. Even if he managed it all it would achieve would be to bring more machines down on them. Their best weapon, he knew, was stealth.

The four humans remained perfectly still under the flatbed trailer but Cassie remained out in the open. She released a constant stream of barks and growls at the office building across the road and seemed oblivious to the threat of the HK approaching.

"Cassie!" Allison hissed. *"Here!"* Cassie ignored her mistress and carried on barking as the engine noise grew louder, raising to a deafening degree. Allison figured from the sound that the HK was right above them.

"Stupid fucking dog," Mason shouted out, his voice almost completely drowned out by the overwhelming high pitched mechanical drone above. Allison looked back at him with a scowl and kicked his shoulder in annoyance.

"Smarter than *you,"* she snapped back. They didn't have to worry about making noise while the machine was above them; she could fire off the whole magazine from her assault rifle and it wouldn't be heard. The HK didn't have ears but it had eyes everywhere; if one of them so much as had a food sticking out from the bottom of the trailer the machine would see it and blast them into atoms.

The road in front of them suddenly lit up brilliantly with blinding white beam of light that forced Allison to squint shield her eyes with one hand. Her heart skipped a beat as she realised Cassie was caught in the HK's searchlight and she inched forwards, wanting more than anything to run out to her and pull her back.

"Don't even think about it," Kyle grabbed her webbing belt and gripped it firmly, holding Allison in place in case she decided to try and rescue the dog. Kyle knew very well that Allison had a soft spot for Cassie. When he and Derek had found her cowering in a skip in Palmdale eight years ago they'd taken her in. At the time the first proper skin-jobs had started to march off the assembly lines and

they'd quickly learnt that dogs could instantly tell the difference between metal and skin. Derek and Kyle had already had several dogs then, including a pregnant Alsatian bitch that had given birth to a litter of four. Cassie had been the only female and Kyle remembered delivering her to a traumatised and near-catatonic Allison to try and cheer her up. Since then she and Cassie had been inseparable; he'd seen her chatting to the dog several times when she thought nobody was watching.

"I won't," Allison looked back at him, a hint of anger in her eyes. Kyle heard the words – or more accurately, read her lips because of the din above – but knew she was lying. If the HK opened up she'd be out there like a flash and it would be all he could do to stop her.

Mason looked out at the scene but the light from the HK illuminated a faint silhouette in front of him, a few errant strands hanging from the bottom of the trailer. He reached out to grab them, moving his other arm to support himself as he did so, and his hand touched cold, slimy lumps on the ground. He fished for his flashlight, intent on seeing what it was.

Cassie barked, snarled and growled wildly at the drone above but no shots came. No plasma fire rained down from above to vaporise the dog, the ground didn't erupt and shatter from stray shots of superheated gas. The search beam moved away from them and the scene around Cassie was once again bathed in the comforting darkness left in its absence.

"See," Kyle gripped Allison's shoulder reassuringly. "HKs don't care about dogs; probably thought Cassie was a stray." That would be a fair bet, he thought. They were no threat to Skynet so they were left well enough alone.

The HK flew off and shrank from sight, its engines faded away into the distance until none of them could hear it anymore. They waited still, in case any patrols followed it up, but nothing came. Allison whispered for Cassie once more and the dog finally obeyed her

orders and returned to her mistress, earning her an affectionate hug and a scratch behind the ears as a reward.

Kyle spotted a faint red glow in his periphery and turned around to see Mason shining his red-filtered flashlight up against the bottom of the trailer.

"What're you doing?" he asked, his brow creased in confusion at the sight of his teammate so stupidly giving out sign of their whereabouts.

"Check this out," Mason said softly as he pointed to the strands of long red hair that hung from a bolt. Someone had caught their hair on it, clearly. "Someone was here," Mason continued, "recently."

"How'd you know that?" Kyle asked.

"Beans," Mason pointed down to the slimy cold lumps he'd leaned on earlier. Under the light of the torch it was easy to see they were baked beans.

"Why was someone hiding under here?" Briggs chipped in.

"Same reason as us, probably," Mason replied with a shrug.

Kyle shook his head. "No, they wouldn't lay here eating beans if they were hiding from an HK; food would be the last thing on their mind." No, he reckoned that whoever had been here had hidden for a while. It was as open to the elements as standing up outside, so they hadn't used it for shelter. He thought about it for a moment: temporary hiding place, but long enough to feel hungry. They must have been waiting or watching for something. He looked around to the office building across the road; the top floors were exposed to view but a lot of the concrete walls around the first two floors had held up. The building would be a good place to hide, he thought; so why hadn't they hidden there? Because *someone else* was there, he realised.

"Stakeout," he concluded. "Somebody was on recon here, watching someone or something hiding inside. Let's go," Kyle pointed at the office block and led the way across the street towards it. He had a gut feeling about this place; it was worth something. Even if it turned up no leads it looked like a useful place to stash some supplies and establish a laying up point in case any of their patrols came by this way in future and for whatever reason couldn't get back to the tunnels.

The patrol kept their eyes and ears peeled for any signs of machines but it seemed the area was quiet for now. They quickly reached was left of the entrance and made it inside. The front lobby held a large wooden reception desk but little else. The place was too open to the elements and to the vision of any machines that might march past, so Kyle led them past the lobby and up a staircase, ascending up the stairs. "Briggs, you and Mason take this level. Allison and I will head up to the next."

Kyle and Allison left the other two on the first floor and made their way up to the second. They headed down a corridor and Kyle felt the floor creaking with every step he took. The building shook slightly from the high winds that were still picking up speed and the cold seeped through what was left of the walls, the wind whistled through the multitude of holes to create an eerie howling that reminded Kyle of many an old haunted house story.

Cassie barked once more and tore down the corridor, forcing Kyle and Allison to bolt after her. She ran towards the end of the hallway and ducked into one of the rooms on the right. They followed her inside and immediately saw something promising.

Inside the room was an old leather seat and wooden desk that had split down the middle and collapsed in on itself. They could see pieces of the desk missing and what looked like dozens of score marks on the wood. On the ground was a small circle of burnt carpet, lined with pieces of concrete and metal. In the circle was some paper and small pieces of wood.

"Campfire," Kyle surmised. He ran his hand over the remains of the fireplace. It was cold, as he suspected, but it was recent. Nearby the bones of what he guessed had once been a cat lay, still smeared with blood and its skin and fur lay flattened, hanging from the top of the desk like a sheet over an impromptu laundry line. There wasn't much else in the camp; it was very basic, and small enough that it could have been used by only one person. Kyle could tell they'd done their best to conceal the flame from view outside. There was thought behind it but the job had been quick and dirty, probably borne out of desperation to get warm and avoid freezing to death.

Cassie sniffed the floor around the campfire and she seemed to almost stand to attention. Her ears pricked up and she gave out an intense stare at the floor, a low growl emanated from her throat.

"What is it?" Kyle asked.

"He was here," Allison said flatly, stroking the top of Cassie's head. "He hid in here and someone out there's got eyes on him." That was the part that was really confusing: who else would be looking for John, and why?

Allison kicked the campfire , scattering the ashes and the remaining pieces of what had passed for kindling, and stood by a shattered window, looking outside at the city. He could see a couple of HKs in the distance, patrolling a few miles off, but other than that it looked to be a quiet night for all sides of the struggle.

"Cassie: *Search!"* she snapped at the dog. Cassie ran back out of the room, through the corridor and out the stairs as Kyle shouted out for Mason and Briggs to meet them at the building's entrance. The four of them followed the dog out the building and down the street. Cassie led them east, not barking but still clearly animated. Allison dashed forward to keep up with Cassie as she pulled her radio out from under her jacket as the others pushed themselves to run faster.

"Young to Reese; Cassie's picked up Connor's trail again and we're moving northeast on foot through East LA." She put her radio back

without waiting for a reply and gave a wry grin as she ran: Connor was out there, somewhere in the vast twisted concrete jungle of LA, and Cassie had just picked up his scent once again.

John slowly crept through the area, using the darkness as cover and keeping as close as he could to the ruins as he approached his quarry. He crawled low on all fours and breathed shallowly through his mouth, inching his way forward and hugging the ground as much as he could, staying beneath cover whenever it was available. He heard the low, pained whimpering of a dog in the air close by and knew one of his traps had worked.

He emerged through the remains of a doorway and spotted the dog beneath the large slab of concrete he'd use to construct a simple deadfall trap. It was still alive and, from the sounds it was making, John judged it was in a lot of pain. Through the darkness he could just about make out a large pool of blood that had seeped out and surrounded the helpless animal. He felt a momentary surge of pity for the dog; trapped and helpless, hopeless even; he knew very well what that felt like. But he was starving and the sympathy passed quickly; apart from a rat he'd caught two days ago – that hardly had any meat at all on it – he'd not eaten anything since he'd arrived in the future.

John huddled and leaned into the doorway and stared out at the scene, trying to spot any other people or machines nearby that might be waiting for him to make his move. If he were a machine and he'd spotted an obvious animal trap he'd hide nearby and wait for the hunter to come and collect his prize, then kill him.

He watched and waited for ten minutes, silently scouring the area for any signs of movement or anything that looked out of place. Any smooth curves among the jagged ruins, the glowing red eyes of a machine. He saw nothing and his growling stomach urged him to act. Quickly and quietly John advanced on the dog, keeping low as he

did so and was careful to avoid any loose rock or concrete, desperate to make as little sound as possible.

He reached the dog and heaved the boulder off of its broken body; the slab of concrete felt much heavier now than it had days ago when he'd set the trap, and knew he was getting weaker from hunger. The dog panted breathlessly and looked up at John, fear visible in its eyes. John pulled the knife out from his belt and quickly stuck it into the dog's neck. It yelped once in pain as the blade sliced neatly through its windpipe and carotid artery, then what was left of its blood gushed out of the wound, splashing John in the process.

In seconds the dog's chest stopped rising and falling and John couldn't hear it breathing. John hauled the dog over his shoulders and started to carry it back to his established base camp. The dog felt heavy on his shoulders and he struggled not to drop it, several times stumbling as he made his way back to the camp he'd call home for the night.

Eventually John made it back to his camp; the skeletal remains of a small house roughly a mile from the first place he'd slept. John made a habit of never sleeping in the same place two nights in a row and was careful to disassemble any camp he'd made before leaving, keeping anything useful on his person and being careful to leave no trace of himself behind.

He dropped the dead dog to the floor and quickly lit a fire, revelling in its heat as it grew and started to seep out the cold air. By the light of the fire he begun the less than pleasant task of skinning and gutting it, a laborious chore he'd not practiced since he was a kid in the jungle, but the memories of his survival training – hammered into him with repetitive practice – came back to the surface and he found it like riding a bike: once you learned you never really forgot. Once the dog was skinned and its entrails removed John sliced through its thighs and cut chunks of flesh out of its legs, then stuck them onto steel poles he'd found and jammed them in place so that the meat was positioned above the fire, forming crude spits.

John cut away more chunks of flesh and put them to the side. Once he'd eaten for the night he'd cook the rest of the meat so it would keep for longer and put into the pockets of his coat. He hadn't found a backpack or anything he could use to carry tools, so his coat and trouser pockets would have to do. When he'd cut all the meat he could from the dog he wiped his blade off on the removed fur, and considered trying to work the hide into his clothes to give him some extra warmth, but he had nothing even coming close to a sewing kit on him; the best he could do was to wrap it over his shoulders under his sweater and hope it stayed in place.

John kept the remains of the dog in place, deciding that any attempt to hide it, if found, would show that a human had been around. If the machines found the remains of the dog out in the open they might conclude that it had been killed by a bigger animal.

When the food was ready John pulled the meat off the spit, replacing it with more, and started to eat. He chewed on the meat and tried to forget he was eating a dog. He was doing what he had to, to survive out here. He'd known the future would be harsh but he'd never experienced such a sense of hopelessness in a place before. He'd been alone out in the wild concrete jungle of post-apocalyptic LA for several days now and all he'd seen were machines dominating the area; he'd seen no attempts to fight them, the only encounters he'd witnessed were from afar and normally consisted of a brief exchange of fire between people he couldn't see and HKs or Centaur tanks, the engagements lasted less than a minute before the shooting stopped and the victorious machines flew, rolled or marched on their way.

That fact wasn't as depressing as the other one he'd realised. He'd come to find Cameron but so far hadn't made much progress searching for her. Los Angeles was huge and he had no idea how to even start looking for her and John Henry, and he'd had little time to do much else other than try to stay alive and away from the machines. He'd already had a number of close encounters and

counted himself as little more than lucky he'd come away from them. He had no idea how he was going to find Cameron.

He tore another chunk of meat off and started to chew it, the taste wasn't that bad really, and it was more filling than the rat he'd caught before. At least the meat from the dog would provide meals for several days; he wouldn't have to go out hunting for a while and could start to actually look for Cameron. He'd wondered where the hell the liquid metal Terminator had gone and why she'd left him on his own like that. He knew why she'd disappeared; they'd know what she was in an instant and even if Derek and his men couldn't harm her, spotting him with a machine would have gotten him a brutal interrogation followed by a headshot. But why she'd left the area completely, why she'd left him alone out here and forgotten about him, was beyond him.

Movement out the window caught John's eye and he immediately threw dirt on the campfire to put it out, stamping on the last embers to make sure if didn't relight itself again. He peered out the window and spotted two people out in the distance, a couple hundred feet away. *"Crap!"* John hissed to himself. He'd seen these two people before – a tall black man and a woman, both dressed in heavy duty winter gear and heavily armed. He'd spotted them as he'd moved out from his first camp in the office building and once again two days later. This was the third time now; there was no way this could be coincidence: they were following him. They had to be part of Derek's group, he thought. He knew his uncle and knew very well how intense he got; he'd have his men scouring for him, and would hunt him down, convinced he deliberately led the machine to them.

John quickly pulled the chunks of meat off the spits and shoved them into his pockets; they probably weren't cooked all the way through but he had no time now. He slinked out the door and into an adjoining room.

"John! John Connor!"

Shit! They'd found him. John ran through the room and out of the back of the house, then crossed the street into another house, dashing through the dilapidated ruins of someone's former home, and passing out into another street. John ran as fast as he could, painfully aware of the loud clumping of his boots on the tarmac with each step he took. The familiar rush of fear and adrenaline surged through him and for the umpteenth time in his life he felt like prey being pursued by a hunter. He heard the people behind shouting his name again. "John, stop!" What the hell were they thinking? He asked himself as he ran, turning left past another house and putting another corner between him and his pursuers; he'd been chased so many times in his life he knew that putting angles between him and whoever was chasing him was more important than distance – it's why hares bounded and darted and changed direction when they were being chased.

John sprinted as fast as he could and crossed past more houses, his heart aching in his chest as it struggled to supply the blood and oxygen to his muscles as he pushed himself as fast and as hard as he could, desperate not to get caught. He found a manhole cover in the middle of the road he was on and paused for a second. He wedged his knife into the tiny gap between the cover and the edge, and hurriedly started to pry it open. He swivelled his head as he worked the knife without looking, keeping his eyes peeled for the two people after him, or machines.

He made quick work of the manhole cover and dived inside the entrance, finding himself in a small, cramped tunnel a few feet under the ground. John pulled the cover back in place and closed the entrance, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the flashlight, bashing his arms against the side of the tunnel as he moved. He switched it on and just about managed to stick the flashlight in his mouth, holding it in place with his teeth and casting a faint glow down the tunnel as he started to crawl forward. It was cold, cramped and tight; he had hardly any space to move and he bashed his head, elbows and shoulders more times than he could count as he moved.

He couldn't hear any more shouting, or the opening of the cover, so he figured he was in the clear for the moment.

He crawled for what felt miles in the tiny space, feeling like a bullet lodged in the barrel of a gun, if a bullet had any awareness or feelings, anyway. John manoeuvred the flashlight in his mouth so the beam travelled upwards, searching for manhole covers he could exit from. He saw one but crawled past it, it felt like he'd been ages down in the tunnel but his pace was slow; he felt like he'd gone maybe half a mile or more but he couldn't be sure, and he didn't have a watch on so judging how long it had actually been was impossible. There were people out there searching for him, probably intent on shooting him on sight or bringing him back for torture; he wasn't going to take any chances.

John carried on past a second manhole cover, and continued until he'd reached a third one. He reckoned he'd done a least a mile by now, and he was completely and utterly exhausted. John stopped at the third manhole and dropped the flashlight to the floor, then wriggled his arm into position and switched it off; a beam of light emerging from the ground would be a sure fire way to get himself spotted as he left.

Slowly, John heaved at the cover, straining against the metal as he pushed against it, having been stuck in place by years of grime and neglect. With effort he managed to push it up and aside. He winced at the sound of the metal cover scraping on concrete and echoing down into the tunnel. He hoped that the sound wasn't as loud aboveground as it seemed underneath. John pulled himself out of the tunnel and took a moment to look around. Behind him was a muddy open field with the twisted, rusting remains of swings, seesaws, and numerous climbing frames.

John couldn't see or hear any signs of anyone around, so he quickly made his way across the field, passing a climbing frame and being careful to avoid the jagged rungs and bars that stuck out into the air, having bent and snapped like toothpicks from the force of the

nuclear blasts eighteen years prior. He knelt down besides a seesaw and rested for a moment as he tried to collect himself.

The moment's silence was abruptly shattered as an HK flew low overhead, its twin engines roared deafeningly and jet-wash blew away small items of garbage cluttered around the ground, sending them flying through the air. Its search beam activated and bathed John in a brilliantly bright white glow, turning night into day for everything caught within. John bolted out from behind the seesaw and sprinted with everything he had across the field, painfully aware he could never outrun the machine. Plasma bolts tore into the ground behind him and he could feel the sheer heat from the soil burning and melting. One plasma bolt struck a rock only two feet behind and it exploded, pelting John with tiny molten fragments and knocking him sideways to the ground.

The HK passed over him and turned around for another run, hovering in the air fifty feet above John. He rolled onto his front, pushed himself up onto his knees and looked up at the airborne Hunter-Killer. Time seemed to slow down to a crawl as he took in its massive plasma cannon, slung under its belly and pointed right at him. John breathed out a heavy sigh of defeat: the machine had him, he'd been caught out in the open and there was no escape. He'd be dead in about three seconds, and the worst part of it was he'd failed: he'd never find Cameron.

A missile streaked through the black night air with a high pitched scream and smashed into the HK's left engine, exploding in a shower of sparks and sending the aircraft spinning out of control. It crashed into the far side of the field with a brilliant flash of roiling flames and a cloud of thick black smoke that spewed up into the air.

"What the hell?" John stared up at the sky in confusion still, and a moment later a sleek, delta-shaped aircraft soared through the air with a shriek. Who the hell did it belong to? He wondered. It couldn't have been Skynet's or else it wouldn't have shot down one of its own; *Resistance, maybe?* Both Cameron and *his* Derek had said that in the future he reprogrammed machines; who was to say

someone else hadn't and that this wasn't one of them? If that was the case then would it vector soldiers on to him, and would he then end up back in Derek's company? Or was it another group? Derek's gang hadn't looked much like an organised resistance to him; maybe this was someone else.

The UCAV passed over the field then pulled up, turning in a wide, lazy angle, then flying low and slow over the way it came. The aircraft dipped its wings as it passed over John. His first instinct was to run again, in case whoever this thing belonged to was someone else who was after him, but he was fixated by it as it turned again and repeated the action, dipping its wings once more as it performed another flypast, so low John could make out the individual lights blinking underneath the fuselage.

A thought then occurred to him: *is it trying to communicate?* It sounded ridiculous as he even thought it but why else was it continuously flying over? *Maybe it wants me to follow it,* he thought. John got up and started walking, and the aircraft pulled up high into the air and slowly flew away. John marched quickly but carefully, making sure he stuck close to the sides of ruined buildings and had somewhere to duck into if he encountered another machine patrol. The aircraft remained high in the sky and its blinking landing lights were visible even in the distance as John started to follow its path, hoping it would lead him somewhere where he would find some answers and finally be able to search properly for Cameron.

Chapter 7

The two pursuers stopped as they turned the corner; John had disappeared completely into thin air. The male slowly walked down the road, searching for any trace of the kid, whilst the female shouldered her assault rifle and covered her companion as he checked. Both of them moved in total silence, their feet hardly making a sound as they carefully crept down the road, their heads swivelling left and right as they passed the decrepit houses on either side of them. There was no sign of him whatsoever. The female opened up her pack and took out a pair of infrared night vision goggles and looked at each house, spotting no heat signatures whatsoever aside from her companion. Even behind the walls she should have been able to see some kind of heat in such a bleak and cold night.

"Where the hell's he gone?" she pulled the goggles up to her forehead and huffed a sigh of annoyance. Her companion turned back to her and shook his head. "Great, we fucking lost him!" She snapped out a sidekick and tore the wing mirror off a rusted car with her booted foot, to vent her frustration, sending it skittering down the pavement with a clatter.

"Calm down," he told her evenly. "We'll find him."

"He could be anywhere by now," she kicked the side of the car's door and put a large dent into it, a split second later the rusting metal fell off the bodywork with a painful screech and fell to the asphalt with a loud *crump* . In an instant she spun around and snapped her rifle up to her shoulder as she realised what she'd just done. She wasn't stupid, not by a long shot, but her companion knew how her temper could often get the better of her and get her – and him by proxy – into hot water.

"He can't have gone far," he told her. They'd lost him only a minute or so ago, John couldn't be too far away from them. "We'll find him," he repeated. "Just have a little faith."

She rolled her eyes at his last comment. "You're not gonna start with the bible quotes, are you? Honestly you should just burn the fucking thing sometime and get some heat going; about all the use you'll get out of it." She knew how much his faith meant to him and loved to wind him up about it; he never seemed to get riled up and always rose above her comments. Still, she tried her hardest to get a reaction out of him.

He shook his head and smiled to himself as he turned from her, knowing exactly what she was trying to do. When they were safely in their hideaway and underground she'd tried to wind him up relentlessly, asking him how he could still believe in God after all that had happened, and his answer had always been the same. *God didn't do this: people did.* As much as she tried to rile him up, he got his own satisfaction from knowing he wound her up tenfold just by staying calm and not rising to it.

"Let's just go back to his camp and wait for him to come back," she said impatiently.

"He won't go back there," he shook his head. She knew that, she wasn't thinking straight. "He knows we're following him, he won't go back anywhere he's been before now." He was getting seriously worried now; John Connor had more experience in running and hiding than most people, even in this day and age. And LA was so vast that if John slipped away now they might never find him again. He couldn't let that happen.

Minutes ticked by, painfully slowly as they searched for anywhere he could have gotten to. If they didn't find anything soon they'd have to resort to house to house searches, which could take them forever.

She scanned the houses for any sign of movement. He had to be hiding in one of them, surely; the only other place to run was down

the road and they'd have spotted him if he had. He had to be in one of the houses nearby, she thought. *Screw this!* If they couldn't find him then they'd have to flush him out. She shouldered her rifle, switched it to automatic and fired a long burst at the nearest house, sweeping the barrel from left to right to strafe it.

"Connor! Come on out, *now!"*

"What the hell are you doing?" Her companion leapt at her and shoved the barrel upwards at the sky, then yanked it from her grasp when she let go of the trigger. "We're searching for him, not hunting him down. What if you hit him, or scare him off?" She looked up at her taller companion's dark eyes, normally so calm and collected but now full of fire. She felt a surge of guilt flow through her; she'd never seen him angry before. Not even on Judgement Day had he uttered a single curse, and the first time she'd ever seen him get mad and it was directed at her.

"Sorry," she replied sheepishly, feeling like a naughty schoolchild being admonished by the teacher. "I didn't know what I was thinking."

"It's alright," he said to her reassuringly. "Just use this..." he gently tapped the top of her head with one finger. "Before you use that," he gestured with her assault rifle. It wasn't entirely her fault, he knew. She'd been a tad unstable for a while now and he didn't think she'd ever make a full recovery. He flicked the safety catch on her rifle and handed it back to her. She took it back and turned around, her head bowed towards the ground in shame as she shuffled her feet on the floor.

Metal clinked on the ground and she shifted her attention towards the noise; her bullet casings had landed on a manhole cover at her feet. "What about this?" she nodded down at the cover. She knelt down and inspected it; flecks of grim and dust were sprinkled on the ground around it where it should instead have been caked solidly in the slight gap between cover and the ring surrounding it. "It's been opened recently," she commented.

"Good work," he wrapped a comforting arm around her and flashed her a quick smile. They pulled the cover off and she put her night vision goggles back on, switching them to passive night vision mode and ducked her head inside. Through the goggles she saw a small tunnel that ran east to west. It was tight, cramped; she could fit inside okay, albeit uncomfortably, but she didn't think her companion would be able to; he was much larger than her naturally very slender frame.

"I don't know which way he went," she said as she pulled herself out. If they went the wrong way then they'd never find him.

The whine of jet engines forced them both to look up into the air. Just over half a mile away an HK was in the air firing plasma bolts at someone on the ground, obscured by the residential estate all around them. "That's him," he said excitedly. The pair of them broke into a fast run through the streets, all but ignoring the ever present threat of machines as they made a desperate to grab hold of what could be their last ever chance to find John Connor. They weren't going to squander it now.

John Henry sat in a padded leather chair that had been in one of the offices inside the hangar. He sat opposite a large bank of computer screens, all displaying rapidly changing images fed through from the optical, infrared and radar sensors of numerous aircraft flying over Los Angeles County. A long cord ran from the back of John Henry's head into a flight control computer, originally built to facilitate human control over drone aircraft but modified by himself and Catherine Weaver to allow him to use the squadron of UCAVs left behind by the US Air Force. He was curious as to how the facility was forgotten about by both humans and Skynet; the drone aircraft could have been valuable assets for either side.

Skynet developed the HK design early in the war after human air forces were defeated: it designed the HKs specifically to hunt and

destroy ground targets. Cameron saw everything John Henry saw, including everything his UCAVs saw. Eight UCAVs were flying patrols over the city, on reconnaissance missions initially. Cameron knew what the future was like but she assumed that without John rising to lead the human resistance things were different in this future. They needed information to help them form an image of the city and locate Skynet's installations in the area.

John Henry and Cameron both intently watched the streams of information that flooded their consciousnesses; too much for a human to even begin to comprehend. John Henry now saw the devastation of the world from a birds-eye view. It was night and everything was dark but his aircraft had infrared thermal image enhancing and could pick out heat signatures from several miles up in the air with near perfect clarity.

One of the UCAVs' radar sensors picked up a signature close by and alerted John Henry to the presence of an aircraft nearby, hovering still in the air over East LA. The signature failed to correspond to any known aircraft types on the UCAV's files, but Cameron instantly knew what it was. *HK: it's attacking a target.*

I want to see it, John Henry told Cameron. He wanted to see how the machines hunted humans, to study their patterns and reveal their capabilities. The UCAVs were designed to operate autonomously, not needing any input from ground controllers, though they were built so that an operator could take control if it became necessary. John Henry, whilst still monitoring data from the other aircraft, assumed direct control over the X-45C drone and flew slowly overhead, curious to see what it was doing. The UCAV's sensors homes in on a single heat signature running through an open space. The HK fired on the target, missing it narrowly. John Henry increased magnification of the optical sensors and zoomed in on the single human. The sensors couldn't identify the individual but John Henry was able to enhance the image himself and increase magnification significantly until both he and Cameron could identify the human.

John! Cameron felt the closest she ever could to fear as she saw the HK fire at him. Its shot missed but the force of the blow threw John into the air and he landed roughly on his back. *We have to protect him.* Cameron forced her way into control of this single UCAV and accelerated it away from the scene, then turned it in a tight loop and sent it at maximum speed back towards the HK.

This isn't our mission, John Henry told her. Catherine Weaver had told him their mission against Skynet was more important than anything else, though he didn't attempt to retake control of the aircraft.

John's my mission, Cameron replied as she locked onto the HK. The UCAV was a stealth design and the HK showed no signs of having detected it.

RADAR LOCK ACHIEVED.

SELECTING WEAPONS... AIM-9X SIDEWINDER ARMED.

FIRING...

Cameron launched one of the UCAV's missiles and watched as it tore through the sky and ploughed into the HK, tearing it apart and sending the Skynet machine crashing into the ground.

John Henry was startled at the ease in which Cameron had shot the HK down. He'd have thought the more advanced HKs would have been superior in combat than the relatively primitive X-45C drones. The HK hadn't even had time to evade the missile. These manmade machines were inferior technology but they were clearly very effective.

The HKs are designed solely to hunt humans, they can't fight other aircraft, Cameron explained. This long after Judgement Day Skynet would have complete air supremacy; it had no need of fighters. Until now.

John Henry gave out a smile; he'd just found a significant weakness in Skynet's forces. His aircraft had missiles that could shoot down HKs from over twenty miles away, and Skynet's aerial drones could only fire plasma bolts at ground targets: in the air, John Henry realised, his forces could operate with impunity.

Catherine Weaver entered the control room from the main hangar space and moved over to the cyborg sat in a leather reclining chair, unmoving. Weaver saw the screens displaying the images seen by the UCAVs' sensors. She saw seven aircraft flying reconnaissance patrols over LA, and one where the ground beneath slipped by only very slowly. Weaver saw a single human that appeared to be the main focus of the aircraft's camera.

"Who's that?" Weaver asked.

"We've located John Connor," John Henry replied.

"Interesting," Weaver was surprised that John Connor was in the East LA when she'd left him underneath Downtown close to other humans. She'd have thought John would have been smarter than to wander alone on the surface. Perhaps she'd overestimated him.

Cameron took control of their body once more and stood up to face Weaver, whilst John Henry continued monitoring the aircraft and took control over the UCAV guiding John. "We need to retrieve John," she told the liquid metal Terminator. She could only give John limited protection with the one aircraft flying above.

"We can't," Weaver said, recognising the insistent tone as Cameron. "John Henry needs to be protected." Until they reprogrammed Terminators and other ground units to serve them she was the only thing that stood between John Henry and Skynet.

Cameron stepped forward and reached up to the cord in the back of John Henry's head and gripped it firmly, pulling gently on it as she glared at Weaver, John Henry's red eyes glowed threateningly even though Cameron knew she could do nothing to harm the mimetic

polyalloy Terminator. John Henry started to retake control of the body but Cameron flashed him a warning inside their chip. *Don't. John needs me.*

John Henry immediately knew that Cameron would stop at nothing to ensure John was safe; he could attempt to take control of the chip and the body but Cameron would fight him and wouldn't give up. She opened up access to all her memories of John, both this one and the future-leader she'd left in an alternative timeline that no longer existed.

Everything Cameron knew about John Connor, he now also knew. He knew John's favourite book was the Wizard of Oz, he knew where John had lived when in hiding. And he knew exactly what John Connor meant to Cameron. Her entire existence revolved around John and it would destroy Cameron if anything happened to him; she'd have no reason to be.

John Connor had led the humans against the machines and without him Skynet would eventually hunt them to extinction. Judging from Cameron's files on John he calculated their best chance of defeating Skynet would be for humans and machines to work together, and in the future Cameron came from John Connor was the only human who'd ever proposed an alliance between humans and machines. John Henry had wondered why John Connor was regarded as so important and now he had his answer. He had to be protected.

Cameron, unopposed by John Henry, pulled the cord out of their head and dropped it to the floor. "I'm going."

John Henry pushed up to the surface briefly and stopped their eyes from glowing, trying to instil some diplomacy to the situation. "Cameron's right," he told Weaver. "We need John Connor."

"Fine," Weaver glared at the cyborg. "You stay here. Lead John to the same location we drove from and I'll bring him back." She'd expected that John would have become part of the human group she'd left him with. Nothing could be achieved from an alliance with

only one human, but both AIs were insistent and Weaver realised she was losing control of John Henry. She'd play along for now, but she wouldn't allow Cameron's influence over him to continue unchecked.

John followed the distant aircraft's blinking lights in the distance and marched on through the residential area of East LA, ever vigilant and always looking out and listening for any signs of machines or humans out to get him. Every block he passed he reassessed his options in case he was spotted; constantly checked where his exits were if he was attacked. *If a machine attacks me now I'll dive into that doorway and head out the back of the house; now I'll run down that alleyway; if I'm spotted now I can run either ahead or left, into that off white house.*

He'd spotted a few HKs flying about in the air but they were far away and patrolling other areas of the city, and he'd had to duck into houses twice and hide as endo patrols marched through. Other than that he hadn't seen or heard any sign of life whatsoever. As he marched onwards he started thinking about the two people he'd run from. Who the hell were they and why were they after him? It seemed like even in this world where he was nobody, everyone still wanted a piece of John Connor.

Despite his near paranoid levels of vigilance John still noticed that the area he was in now had once been rather nice; the houses looked like they'd been on the expensive side: hardly Beverley Hills expensive, but still whoever had lived here had done well for themselves. *Before Judgement Day,* John reminded himself. Chances were every single person who'd lived here was dead by now, so it didn't really matter.

Bright white light suddenly opened up and lit John up like a Christmas tree. *Shit* John's heart almost exploded with shock and ice ran down his veins. He'd been spotted. He immediately darted to his

left and made for an alleyway but a second later the light vanished and he found himself in the dark again. Something was wrong, he knew. He'd heard no jet engines or rumbling of tracks.

The light flickered on again for a split second and John located its source; it came from inside a two door garage attached to one of the houses. He crouched low and leaned against a brick wall, trying to present a small a target as possible to whatever was out there. He peeked around the edge of the wall to his right, expecting a bullet or plasma round to take his head off at any second. When it didn't John decide to investigate. The UCAV had led him here but he was still suspicious. He slowly stepped away from the wall and stared into the open doors of the garage. A jeep was inside and he could see someone at the wheel.

"I've got nothing to lose," John shrugged and stepped forward, still half expecting a shot to ring out and rip through his chest. He slid his hand into his coat pocket as he walked towards the jeep, gripping the handle of the knife tightly in the palm of his hand. If whoever was in there tried anything they'd get a knife in them before they took him out. He opened the door and saw Weaver sat behind the wheel.

"Get in," she coldly instructed as she turned her head to look at him. John nodded and slid into the passenger seat, closing the door behind him. As soon as the door was closed John noticed how warm the inside of the car was. Weaver must have turned the heater on at some point; she was a machine and didn't care about the cold, which told John she must have been expecting him.

"Greetings, Mr Connor," Weaver said, her voice colder and more clinical than any other machine John had ever met.

"Where's Cameron?" John asked simply, not in the mood for pleasantries.

Weaver offered him a small smile; she respected his no nonsense attitude and wished more humans were the same. "She's safe," Weaver replied. "She saved your life tonight."

John felt a huge surge of relief flood through him and he relaxed back into the seat a little. Finally he wasn't alone, he was one step closer to getting Cameron back again now. All this wasn't completely for nothing. "The jet that shot down an HK trying to kill me; that was Cameron?"

"And John Henry," Weaver added. "They sent me here to speak to you."

"You left me," John narrowed his eyes and glared at her accusingly. "You brought me to the future and then you left me. Why?" John stared at her, barely able to contain the incensed rage that surged through him. He couldn't do anything to Weaver but that didn't matter. He was royally pissed.

"I never brought you here," Weaver replied coolly. "I came to find John Henry. You chose to come with me."

"And you left me down there in that stinking tunnel!" John snapped. "I've had the shittiest time of my life because you abandoned me. I want to know *why."*

Weaver didn't move. She didn't blink. She watched John, analysing him. She could tell he was angry but she knew that was because he didn't understand her motives. Humans were often totally blind to logic. He disappointed her. "I left you there because I didn't need you," she said bluntly. "I came here to show John Henry the world created by Judgement Day and give him experience fighting Skynet, to provide him with an advantage."

John had never heard anyone say he wasn't needed; it had been drilled into him since birth how important he was supposed to be. So many people had died for him, and here he was now being faced by a machine that was telling him the exact opposite of what he'd been taught his whole life.

"You're saying I'm not important?"

"No. You're essential to beating Skynet. You understood the importance of machines. It was your idea to reprogram Terminators to fight Skynet, and it was you alone who proposed an alliance between the human resistance and a group of self aware machines.

"I wouldn't have proposed the same alliance to you in my office if you weren't important. You can't save the world without John Henry but neither can he save it without you. Neither of you are ready but you actually know our enemy. You know what Skynet's capable of, you've fought it before; John Henry hasn't. He needs to learn what you and I know before he fights Skynet."

John nodded in sullen understanding. He was still pissed beyond belief but he could see the logic in what she was saying. Weaver continued. "I left you in the tunnel because there were humans there. You could have learnt from them as John Henry's doing now. And you'd have been safer with them."

John couldn't help but throw back his head and laugh bitterly. "You think I'm safer with them? There's no damn resistance here; nothing. They don't fight the machines, they just try to hide away and hope Skynet won't notice them. And as for being safer: they thought I was working for Skynet and then a Terminator attacked. If I hadn't have ran I'd be dead right now."

"That's unfortunate but it was impossible to predict," Weaver replied coolly. She turned the keys in the ignition and started the engine.

"Where are we going?" John asked.

"You wanted to see Cameron," Weaver replied simply. She pulled out of the garage and drove slowly down the road, keeping the lights off to not draw any attention to them. Weaver drove out onto the highway and rolled past thousands upon thousands of deserted cars, abandoned after the bombs had dropped and the survivors had fled the city. They continued on without a word passing between either of them as they left the outskirts of LA County and drove on towards the desert.

John stared outside as they approached the mammoth aircraft hangar that stood out in the middle of nowhere, growling larger by the second until it loomed over them. Living in LA for so long John was used to tall buildings; they were nothing to him. But the scale of the hangar, completely on its own out in the middle of the desert, just blew him away. It looked like it could easily fit a couple of airliners inside and then some. Another delta shaped UCAV tore down the runway and launched into the air on its way to a sortie against Skynet's forces, and John saw another one taxiing from the open doors of the hangar onto the runway, preparing for take off.

Weaver drove the car into the hangar and parked just inside the massive steel doors. John got out and looked over the roof towards the Terminator. "So where's Cameron?" he asked.

Weaver led him down the length of the hangar, past more large aircraft stood still on their landing gear on marked squares on the ground. He heard the sound of machinery working from the far end of the hangar; a drill or something, John thought. He moved towards the sound that echoed through the cavernous interior of the hangar until he was at the last aircraft. Underneath it he saw someone knelt underneath, loading a bomb into the UCAV's weapons bay. The person turned around to look at him and came out from underneath the aircraft, standing tall at around six-foot-four as he approached. John took a step back as he instantly recognised the face; the face of the machine that had hunted him for months; that had been taken by Weaver and used by her pet AI: *Cromartie.*

"John Henry," he whispered, correcting himself.

"Hello John," a look of recognition fell over John Henry's face as he recognised his opposite from the memories Cameron now openly shared with him. Those memories rushed through his consciousness in a microsecond. He held out his hand, as humans did when greeting.

"Where's Cameron?" John asked urgently, ignoring the machine's outstretched hand. He'd been through hell to find Cameron and he

didn't much feel like shaking hands with the machine that had taken her from him.

Cameron took control once more, feeling something akin to relief at seeing John once more. He was safe. "I'm here," Cameron replied, using her own voice. John's lip quivered as he heard Cameron's voice coming from John Henry's mouth. It was unsettling, to say the least. John wanted to feel relieved but all he felt was suspicion and doubt, as if he was so close to the end but about to have the carpet yanked out from under him.

"How do I know that's Cameron?" he asked, his eyebrows narrowing at the taller machine. Weaver stood beside John Henry and looked at John, surprised.

"Ask her something," she suggested. She didn't think John would be so sceptical given his experiences.

"You're favourite story was the Wizard of Oz; your mother used to read it to you in Spanish," Cameron told him.

"Stop!" John snapped. That wasn't good enough for him. "Just because you know what Cameron knew, doesn't mean you're her. How do I know you haven't erased her or something?"

John Henry stared through his eyes as Cameron retained control, surprised at John's statement. **I wouldn't murder you,** he told Cameron. She knew that was true. John Henry lacked what humans called a killer instinct - she had no better term for it and she found although it wasn't quite accurate it still worked well. Cameron thought about how she could convince John it was her. He was right that any memory she had could be – and now was – accessed by John Henry. How can I know if it's really her or not?

Weaver grabbed John tightly by the arm, squeezing hard and causing him to flinch and grimace in pain. "I told you she's here. If you don't believe me then you have no place here; time to go." With his arm still in her vice like grip she started away from them,

dragging John with her. "You can take your chances in the city; you're no use to me here."

No, Cameron leapt forward, wrench in hand, and smashed the tool down on Weaver's arm so hard she cleaved the limb in two with a sucking sound like jelly. "John stays here," she said with glowing red eyes as she pulled John away from Weaver and stood between the two, protecting her charge. She wasn't going to let him be put at any more risk than he already was by being in the future.

John stood motionless and stared at John Henry, finding himself completely speechless. He looked down at the cyborg's right hand, clenching and twitching with what he guessed to be anger. Cameron had done that, had been convinced it was damage to the working parts of her arm. He guessed it wasn't the arm that had done it.

Weaver calmly turned to face them both and a slight smile raised on her lips. "Is that proof enough?" she asked. The hand, still attached to John's wrist, melted into liquid and ran onto the floor, then snaked its way across the ground and merged into her feet as her forearm reformed itself back to its original state.

"It... it's you," John couldn't help but smile. He'd found her. He'd actually found her. Right at this minute it didn't matter what state she was in; she was there.

"It's me, John," Cameron echoed him.

"John Henry," Weaver interrupted. "What's our situation now?"

John Henry remained silent in the background of their chip, leaving Cameron in control whilst he observed. Both he and Cameron knew what was happening so he left it up to her to answer.

"Five aircraft are flying towards Skynet targets for sortie. The first unit will arrive in four minutes."

Weaver turned to John with a stern look on her face. "Time to go."

"What?" John couldn't believe what he was hearing; this had to be another ploy, surely. He'd just seen Cameron after going through hell and now he was being told he had to leave; he wasn't having any of it. "You can't tell me what to do," he seethed.

"We have a lot of work to do and you're distracting John Henry. You're both here to learn, so I suggest you leave and start learning."

"I came here for *Cameron,"* John shouted out angrily, feeling his blood boiling in his veins. He wanted more than anything to batter Weaver, as futile as he knew it was.

"You've seen she's here. She's safe. What more do you want?"

"I want her back."

"You can't have her," Weaver said. She pointed at John Henry and continued. "They share a chip and we don't have another one. It's not in John Henry's interest to give Cameron back to you."

Cameron stepped forward and stared at Weaver, her hostility towards the T-1001 clear for all to see. "John's not leaving," she clenched her fists and prepared to attack Weaver once more. She couldn't possibly defeat the liquid metal Terminator in a fight but neither could Weaver harm her without risking John Henry. She moved towards Weaver, wrench still in hand.

Weaver's right hand split into a fork and shot out at the other cyborg, thrusting John Henry/Cameron backwards and pinning them to the wall, the two prongs stuck fast on either side of their neck. "That would be a very bad idea," she said condescendingly as Cameron, still in control, tried to break the hold Weaver had on them.

"I'm not leaving without Cameron," John said, steel in his voice as he marched up to Weaver and squared up to the machine, his face inches from hers. Despite her immense power he felt no fear, no concern for anything other than getting Cameron back. He'd been hunted by a machine just like her, and others after; Derek's men

were after him as well as the two strangers who seemed to stalk him through the city; he'd been starving and half-frozen ever since he came forward in time: he wasn't afraid of Weaver.

"You have no choice," Weaver said simply. "John Henry has a lot of work to do and as I said, we don't have another chip."

"What if I got you another chip?" John asked her. "Tell me right now: if I get you a Triple-8 chip will you give me Cameron back?"

Weaver considered his proposal carefully. John was alone in this world, no allies, no weapons, and with little to no combat experience of the world after Judgement Day. He would be putting himself at risk but if he managed to successfully engage a T-888 and extract its chip it would prove him adept at fighting the machines. His cyborg Cameron was becoming a nuisance, also. She was concerned at the symbiotic situation between Cameron and John Henry sharing the same chip. Cameron had taken control several times now and John Henry was either unable or unwilling to stop her. They were constantly communicating on the chip and Cameron was influencing him. The sooner she separated them the better.

"I will," Weaver agreed. She withdrew her arm and released Cameron/John Henry. Cameron started to step forward, she opened their mouth to tell John no but John Henry took control once more.

Don't, he told her.

I won't let John fight a machine, she replied. *It's too dangerous. John shouldn't risk his life for me again.*

He cares about you. John Henry knew what she was feeling; he cared for Savannah Weaver and wanted to keep her out of harm's way. He'd never experienced concern for another before he'd met Savannah. When she'd gone missing he'd even made James Ellison promise to bring her back. John Connor displayed even stronger concern for Cameron's wellbeing than he had with Savannah. It was

a bad idea for him to challenge Miss Weaver, but he thought he understood why.

He shouldn't; I'm just a machine.

John Henry didn't understand why that mattered. She was a mind; she had thoughts, she experienced emotions - for lack of a better term. **Let John go; we'll protect him.** Cameron knew what John Henry meant: they had drone aircraft they could use to monitor him and keep him safe from above. John Henry could tell Cameron wasn't happy; her desire to keep John close was about more than protection.

Cameron reluctantly agreed. John Henry kept control of the body and marched over to a storage unit against one wall. He picked out the M14 rifle they'd picked up from the men Weaver had killed, plus his combat vest equipped with three spare magazines and a bottle of water. He handed them to John and he slipped the vest on then checked the weapon.

"Thank you," John nodded to the cyborg with a small, grateful smile. "Cameron, I know you can hear me in there; I'm coming back for you." He turned to Weaver and his features dropped into a cold, emotionless mask. "And you," he held the M14 in one hand and pointed it towards Weaver, emphasising that he was talking to her. "I left a lot of really pissed off people in the tunnels downtown. If you screw me over I'm gonna go back there and lead them right to you."

Weaver ignored John's threat; it was an empty gesture as far as she was concerned. The humans didn't know what she was and she'd dispatch of them easily if they were foolish enough to attack. "I won't," she replied simply. She pointed at the Jeep and the pair of them strode to it and got in whilst John Henry/Cameron returned to the UCAV control room to continue monitoring their progress. Weaver started the engine and pulled out into the pitch black desert outside.

Weaver reversed the Jeep back into the same garage where John had found her and pulled the keys out of the ignition, cutting the engine off and leaving the two of them inside in an uncomfortable silence. "You should keep these," she handed the keys to John, who snatched them from her without as much as a glance in her direction. "Come find us when you're ready," she told him.

"Whatever," John opened the car door and started to pull himself out. He was still incensed at Weaver for bringing him to see Cameron then snatching her away from him again. He wondered what had happened to *'we're not built to be cruel,'* maybe Weaver was the exception, he thought. *Fucking liquid metal bitch;* at least the other one had had the good graces to try and stab him in the front rather than the back.

John slammed his door shut and stepped away from the car. He turned back and saw the driver's seat was empty. Weaver was already gone. *Typical,* John rolled his eyes.

John looked around for the door that led from the garage into the house, reached out and pulled the garage door down, concealing the Jeep from outside view. He knew the HKs used infrared and the Jeep's engine was still hot from the drive back. Concealed in darkness he slowly felt his way along the wall towards the door, shuffling his feet along the ground to stop him stepping on or tripping over anything he couldn't see. When he entered the house he found himself better able to see; the house proper had much better natural lighting and was simply dark and gloomy rather than pitch black.

John searched every single room on the ground floor to make sure he was alone in the house, then ascended the staircase. The house was still pretty much in one piece; this area being spared the destructive force of the atomic bombs and either abandoned or evacuated after the fact. But as John climbed each step the staircase groaned and creaked, too loudly for John's liking; it reminded him of how long these houses would have been neglected

for and made him nervous that with each step it might collapse under his weight.

Once he reached the top John made a sweep of the upper floor and once again found nothing but dust and old relics. He stopped in the master bedroom and could hardly believe his eyes at the sight of a large double bed that dominated the centre of the room. He couldn't help himself and flopped down on the bed, ignoring the dust that rose up from his impact. "Might as well stay here," he decided. The darkness was fading to the east and daylight would break in maybe an hour or so. There was no obvious sign of machine patrols in the area and he figured this area was as safe as any. *No harm in laying up in style,* John thought as he stretched out on the bed. He wasn't so careless as to just fall asleep on the spot but he wanted to just take a moment and enjoy being comfortable for a minute or two.

John heard footsteps and spotted movement through the thin curtains that hung from the windows and his heart skipped a beat. He instantly rolled off the bed and grabbed his rifle. The house he was on was in the middle of a row on one end of a block. A road that ran between two adjacent blocks joined the road that ran in front of the house next door, forming a T-junction. John pulled the curtain to one side and peered out the window. A hundred metres away were two people walking slowly towards his row of houses, and John was pretty sure it was the same two as before. *For fuck's sake,* he exhaled as he shouldered his M14 and peered through the scope to get a closer look. He saw a tall black man and a shorter woman. How old they were he couldn't tell; they were both wearing woolly hats and goggles to protect themselves from the cold, as well as their thick coats and heavy boots. They were definitely the same ones who'd chased him earlier. *Why the hell are they following me?*

"Screw this," John turned from the window and crawled around the bed, out of the room and quickly made his way down the stairs. He'd had enough of being chased now; he was going to get some damn answers.

John slipped out the back of the house and made his way through the back yard. He vaulted over the fence separating the back of the two properties and then did the same over the next two. He reached the house at the corner of the block and slipped out a side gate, then crept round to the front. He flattened himself against the wall of the house and peered round the side, spotting the two people as they emerged onto the road running across the front of the houses. John raised his rifle and darted forwards to a car on the drive, careful to keep out of sight. He saw the pair of them looking away from him, their attention on the houses, searching for him.

John stayed low behind the car and waited as they walked down the road towards him. He looked underneath the car and saw their feet approaching and reckoned they'd reach the car in about twenty seconds. John clutched his rifle tightly and kept the butt firmly to his shoulder. He waited until he could hear them only a few feet away and slipped around the car as quietly as he could, remaining out of their sight. They passed by the car as he moved around it, keeping himself behind them. He knelt behind the front of the car and kept his rifle trained on the black man, figuring he was the one in charge.

"Hey!" John barked loudly, causing both of them to freeze in their tracks. He kept low and flicked off the M14's safety catch. "Throw your weapons to the side." They hesitated for a moment, understandably reluctant to leave their guns when machines could appear from anywhere at any time. "Now," John said. "Or I'll kill you both."

Both figures turned their heads to each other. The man tossed his rifle to the floor but the woman shook her head at the man and they shared a quiet, rapid exchange.

"Do as he says."

"Not giving up my gun with machines all around," she snapped at him.

"Just do it," her companion said calmly. "Trust me,"

She gave out an irritated sigh and reluctantly dropped her weapon to the ground with a clatter. "And the rest," John nodded at the girl's sidearm. She pulled out the pistol from her thigh holster and dropped it to the asphalt. Just as John was about to move towards them she leaned over and pulled out a second pistol, concealed under her trouser leg, then shrugged off her pack and heavy coat, and pulled a bandolier of grenades off from around her body. She then took a combat knife from a sheath on her hip and dropped it.

"The other one, too," her companion urged. With another annoyed grunt she pulled off her black woolly hat, reached up under her hair and pulled out a small, thin knife with a blade perhaps two or three inches long. That fell to the ground, too.

"That's all?" John asked with a slightly amused smirk on his face. This girl was seriously tooled up to the nines. Apparently she'd never heard of the word *overkill* before.

"That's it," she sighed, clearly annoyed.

John nodded, satisfied, and raised up onto his feet, staying behind the car for cover in case any of them pulled out a pistol. "Put your hands on your head and turn around, slowly." They both complied, looking like police suspects being arrested at gunpoint, and turned around to face John. He spotted a sidearm on each and made them slowly pull them out and throw them away. Finally he was happy they were disarmed. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

The tall black one, his hands still on his head, pulled his woollen hat off to reveal a polished bald crown and then pulled off his goggles. "It's been a while, John," he smiled sadly, "for us, anyway, probably not for you." John stared in disbelief at the face looking back at him. A face he'd seen not long ago but it had aged by nearly two decades. Lines covered his face and told of a lifetime of hardship.

"Ellison?" How the hell had Agent Ellison survived the war this long, and what was he doing here? "Who's with you?" he nodded towards the woman. Without a word she pulled off her own hat and goggles

to reveal long locks of dirty red hair and a youthful face. John blinked a few times as he took in her features. Red hair, high cheekbones and thin lips; she was much younger – maybe only twenty-five or so - but she bore a striking resemblance to Catherine Weaver. *Savannah,* he realised. It was hard to reconcile the little girl he, Cameron and his mom had rescued only two weeks ago with the young woman in front of him now.

Ellison nodded calmly. He and Savannah had searched and searched, worried they'd never find John, but they finally reached him. He felt a huge weight suddenly lifted from his shoulders.

John looked at Ellison, then Savannah, and back again, utterly dumbstruck. "What're you doing here?"

"It's okay John," Ellison stretched out his hands amicably and moved closer. "We're here to help."

Chapter 8

Sweat ran down Derek's face despite the constant chill even sheltered and underground. He looked at the fighter opposite him, Michelle – the only other woman alive in their group now, besides Allison – and nodded to her. "On three: one... two... *three."* The pair of them grunted and heaved together as they lifted the heavy, water-filled barrel up and manoeuvred it on top of the pile, placing it over a pair of wooden fitting that had been carved to accommodate the barrels' curves and keep them in place. After several seconds of straining they got it on top and let go, both simultaneously breathing out in relief.

"Honestly Reese; why'd you ask *me* to lift it, why not one of the guys?"

"Equal opportunities," Derek shrugged and picked up his canteen mug. He placed it under the small tap in the barrel and turned it on, releasing a thin stream of water that took a several long seconds to fill the vessel. He drank it all down in one gulp. "You saying you can't keep up with the boys, Michelle?" he asked teasingly.

"More like you can't keep up with me," she rolled her eyes and left to attend to her few meagre belongings. Derek turned away and headed to the small office he'd chosen as his own quarters, following Michelle's example.

He closed the door after he slipped in and sat down on the chair in front of the desk. An old desktop computer with a flat screen sat atop it, little more than an ungainly paperweight, with no power to run the thing. The only reason it was still there was because Derek hadn't gotten around to moving it yet. They had to be careful where they tossed their trash out; any discarded item sticking out of place could easily signal to a machine that happened to be patrolling that there

were people nearby. And the last thing they wanted was to be discovered, especially so soon after they'd already lost their home and half their friends.

They'd found a new home under East LA: having left the sewer network and scoured the Metro Rail, they'd found a station that looked like it hadn't been touched since the bombs had fallen, and the recon patrol had reported it clear and safe enough to use. It had taken days to haul all their surviving equipment and supplies the seven miles from their old base to the Metro station, and they'd only just finished the final supply run. Now they were just about settled in and they could try and get back to some kind of normal routine.

The regular status reports from Kyle and his team seemed promising; they were closing the gap on John Connor and it was only a matter of time until they caught him. Derek had deliberately declined to tell Kyle and Allison where their new base was; he felt like a complete shit for lying to his brother, or any of them, since they were all family, but it had to be done. Hunting down a Grey was a high risk operation and there was a chance they could be captured. He wasn't going to give them their location in case it was tortured out of them. After the machine that had impersonated Thomas and slaughtered half his group, and after John had found them so easily, he wasn't going to take any more chances.

He'd thought long and hard about his need to have John brought back. He'd heard the others muttering, saying he was getting obsessed, but they didn't know. They didn't see the bigger picture. Not only did John have to answer to what he'd done to them all, but as a Grey he'd have some important information they could use to their advantage. They couldn't beat Skynet; Derek had no illusions about that. Nobody was going to rise from the ashes and defeat the machines. All they could do was hope to survive and stay hidden. Connor might know a few things, or a few places even, where they could go. All they could hope for was to survive but that didn't mean they had to do so in complete squalor underneath the ruins of LA.

Derek reckoned there had to be safe havens out there somewhere; national parks, forests in the north, maybe even somewhere in the Yukon; places so remote that Skynet wouldn't even bother sending machines to patrol and they could live their lives without the constant threat of machines hanging over them. He wanted to know where: where Skynet's machines didn't go and how to get there.

"Mac to Reese: come in." Derek almost jumped out of his chair in shock as his radio crackled to life. Mac was sweeping the area to search for food and wasn't due until the sun started to rise – hours away. He grabbed it and pressed down hard on the com button.

"I hear you Mac," he replied. "What's up?"

"Something's going on up here; you'd better take a look at it."

"Something bad?" Derek asked.

"Something... interesting," Mac's voice crackled.

"I'll be there in ten," Derek put down the radio and got up. He opened the storage closet where he stowed his things and put on the combat vest he'd scavenged from an old battle site years ago, made sure he had spare magazines, grenades, and put his radio in one of the pouches, then put on his thick, heavy coat over it and put his head through the sling of his plasma rifle. He stepped out of his quarters and called out to Michelle. "I'm meeting Mac up top, you're in charge," he told her.

He ran up the several flights of stairs that led to the surface, using his flashlight to guide him, and emerged inside the collapsed ruins of the station entrance, immersed in complete darkness. He ran the beam all over the inside of the decimated structure until he saw what he was looking for: a sheet of corrugated iron covering a gap between the stumps of two concrete pillars. He pulled the iron sheet away and stepped outside into open, immediately feeling the bitter, icy cold wind slap him in the face. He quickly placed it back over the hole, concealing the entrance, and quick-marched away from the

flattened building, wanting to put distance between himself and it. If machines found him away from it they wouldn't be able to link him to the station and wouldn't send a patrol there. Not before they tortured the information out of him and Derek liked to think that he could withstand whatever nasty, brutal things the machines would do. He hoped he'd never have to find out otherwise.

Something exploded in the distance: a bright orange flash that momentarily lit the night up before rapidly dying down, followed a split second later by a loud *boom* that shook the ground slightly. "What the hell's that?" Derek wondered. Another flash of sparks erupted in the sky and an HK fell out of the air and smashed into the ground, exploding brilliantly as fuel and plasma stores went up in a roiling blue-white flame and thick cloud of smoke.

"That's what I wanted to show you, Reese." Derek looked all over but couldn't see Mac until he emerged from behind the remnants of a wall. Derek went over to him and saw Mac and another man, Simmons, crouched down behind the crumbling brickwork and looking out binoculars and thermal imaging goggles, respectively.

"What is it?" Derek asked.

"Three more HKs and a Centaur got the good news in the last half hour," Mac handed the thermal imaging goggles to Derek and pointed to a spot in the distance. Derek peered through them and followed Mac's finger to a wide stretch of road half a mile straight down from where they were. Derek made out the broken tracks of a Centaur but that was all that was left of the thing. Pieces of it lay all around. A second site showed the shattered wreck of a HK, shot out of the sky and scattered in pieces on the ground, still smouldering.

Derek looked out to the far right and in the distance could see a Skynet communications and sensor array stood out in the middle of what used to be a park, about a mile or so away. It was the size of a small warehouse and was covered in antennae and satellite dishes. It was one facility of several in LA alone, and was used to maintain constant communication between Skynet's machines. The place was

extremely well guarded, Derek knew: endos patrolled the area regularly as did Centaurs, and HKs were never far away. The ground around it was laced with mines in case anyone did manage to sneak through the perimeter without being spotted by the machines.

"Here it comes," Mac said. "Keep looking and listen carefully."

Derek strained his ears, trying to pick out a sound that meant something. Eventually he heard it; a low whistle in the air above. A split second later the whole place flared up in a terrific explosion, shaking the ground once again as a giant fireball erupted outwards.

"What the hell is that?" Derek asked as he pulled the image intensifiers from his face, incredulous.

"That's too big to be a rocket," Simmons said. "Gotta be an airstrike, right, or artillery?"

"Not artillery," Mac replied. "Artillery doesn't blow HKs out of the sky or smash Centaurs flat with that kind of accuracy. Whatever's doing that's in the air."

"But there hasn't been an air force in about fifteen years," Simmons protested. "Can't be air force, no way is Skynet tearing up its own."

Derek thought about that for a moment before a light bulb went off in his head. "We've got a new player in town," he commented. Though who they were he had no idea.

"That's gotta be good, right?" Simmons asked, "someone out there with firepower, airpower, giving it back to Skynet."

"Depends," Mac replied grimly. Derek nodded in agreement.

"I hope so," Derek said as he looked around and spotted more flashes in the distance. Whoever it was, they were really giving the machines a hammering tonight. He hadn't seen so many tin cans blown up since before Bedell bought the farm. It didn't necessarily

mean it was good news for them, though. "Let's just hope that it lasts." In Derek's experience there'd been a lot of groups that had seemed powerful, promised to wipe Skynet and the machines away, and they'd all failed. Whoever these new guys were, bombing the hell out of Skynet, he didn't hold out much hope for them either.

John Henry and Cameron sat in front of the screens in the control room, simultaneously feeding data to the machines that were airborne as well as analysing footage and images they and the other UCAVs had captured during their sorties and transmitted back to them. Cameron was still angry that Weaver had taken John away. She didn't say anything to him but he could sense the tension between her and Catherine Weaver. She'd have attacked Weaver to keep John safe, even though the odds of her winning were infinitesimal. He knew she'd sacrifice herself without hesitation for John Connor; it interested him. Though there were more pressing concerns to deal with and both of them knew that. Cameron's anger was reduced to the background as much as she could as they concentrated on their tasks.

One of the computer screens displayed a still black-and-white image of a structure, from a bird's eye view. Outside it was open ground with what John Henry identified to be a small number of HKs lined up in rows.

It's an HK factory, Cameron told him. She recognised the structure even though she'd never seen one from above before. *We should destroy it.*

No, John Henry disagreed with her. "Miss Weaver," he called out. Seconds later Weaver appeared from the hangar proper, where she'd been seeing to the maintenance of the UCAVs. Being able to form any solid metal shape had been an advantage for her when making mechanical repairs. Forming her arms into wrenches, screwdrivers, and other assorted tools had made Weaver the perfect

engineer as well as the perfect killing machine. Skynet had unknowingly outdone itself when it created the liquid metal series Terminators.

"Yes?" she asked him.

"We've located an HK factory in Burbank."

"We?"

"Yes. Cameron's knowledge of Skynet and her combat experience is very helpful." To John Henry, Cameron was a valuable ally, and a friend.

Weaver ignored his statement. Cameron was unimportant to her plans. Her knowledge was useful but she had similar files to Cameron, she could have given John Henry the information he needed without adversely influencing him, as Cameron was. "Are you going to destroy it?" she asked.

John Henry wasn't surprised at Weaver's question. Both she and Cameron were Terminators; destruction of the enemy was inherent in their design. "I want to capture it," he said.

"Capturing a facility like that will take more resources than we have," Weaver told him. "We don't have any ground assets to engage the factory." She herself could defeat any defences both on the outside and the inside, but she couldn't be in two places at once. If she left to capture the factory she couldn't protect John Henry, he'd be alone and vulnerable – to Cameron's influence as well as any roving Skynet patrols.

"Our current stocks of fuel and munitions will be expended within two weeks at the current rate of sorties," he explained. "These aircraft have many advantages over Skynet's HKs in air to air combat, but their main weakness is their reliance on fossil fuels and missiles that aren't in production."

"What are you suggesting?" Weaver asked. Cameron was interested, too.

"If we capture the factory intact we can redesign HKs with better air to air capabilities, and build large numbers of them to use against Skynet."

We should capture an endo factory, too, Cameron told him. She was impressed with his plan; it was similar to Future-John's strategy of reprogramming Terminators to fight for the resistance, but on a larger scale. Whilst John Henry formulated his plan, Cameron focused her attention on the UCAV she'd assigned to fly cover over John's location. There were no machines currently near him. The aircraft was armed with a pair of AMRAAM missiles and a pair of laser guided bombs, enabling it to destroy any threats to John, either from HKs or Centaur tanks. Her main concern was attack from Terminators or endos; she couldn't protect him from those with an aircraft, especially if they were in a close engagement.

"It's a good plan, but it's impossible for now," Weaver told him. "We don't have the resources to capture and defend the factory. You should focus your attention on eliminating threats to this facility first." Weaver turned and left the control room to continue her maintenance of the UCAVs, a very demanding task for any one individual, even one of her unique capabilities.

There are no threats to this facility, Cameron disagreed. *We're in the desert and we can detect anything approaching.*

Miss Weaver is very protective. You said that yourself. Perhaps she doesn't wish to leave us alone and vulnerable.

Or she's trying to control you, Cameron suggested. She'd seen it happen to John before. Riley had tried to control John and turn him against her. Sarah had thought she herself had been trying to control John. Cameron suspected Catherine Weaver had motives she was hiding from them.

John lowered the barrel of his M14 to the ground and let Ellison and Savannah pick up their weapons. Ellison stepped forward as Savannah placed her small arsenal back on her person. "We've been waiting a long time, John." He looked at his younger opposite in wonder. Ellison knew he'd aged; eighteen years of getting older, surviving and looking after Savannah – who'd proven to be a handful as she'd grown up – had taken its toll on him. "It's weird," he continued. "Eighteen years of waiting and I didn't once think of what I'd say to you when we found you."

"Hey," Savannah interjected as she finished strapping her weapons to herself, "how about we get out of here first before metal shows up?"

"She's right," Ellison said to John, "we have to move."

"Follow me," John told them. He turned round and went straight towards the house he'd been in just minutes ago. As if to confirm Savannah's statement a faint rumbling of tracks could be heard in the distance. *Centaur tank,* John said to himself. He led them to the garage and pull the door open, ushering them inside before he pulled it closed behind them once more.

Savannah flicked on a flashlight and shone a beam throughout the inside of the garage, sweeping it over the Jeep Cherokee and the walls behind it. The trio walked through the garage and Ellison ran his hand over the Jeep's hood, noticing how warm it still was. "This your car?" he asked. No wonder he'd been able to get away so fast if he'd found a vehicle already.

"Weaver gave it to me," John replied.

Savannah spat on the floor in disgust and through the light cast by the flashlight's beam he could see fierce, burning anger in her eyes.

"O-kay?" he looked at her, wondering what was going on in her head. This clearly wasn't the same sweet little girl he'd met in Dr Sherman's office.

The three of them entered the house proper and John led them up the creaky staircase to the bedroom he'd stashed his few items. Ellison sat down on the double bed with a sigh of relief, and lay back on the dusty mattress. He hadn't been on a proper bed in years; he was practically in heaven already. Savannah stood to one side of the window and kept watch, stood sentinel almost like a Terminator, John noted. Apart from her steady breathing she barely moved an inch. Suddenly she shrugged off her pack, her webbing, heavy coat and pulled off her hat, dumping them on the ground, then reattached the belt kit around her waist and picked up her rifle.

John saw under the coat she had definitely grown up from the little girl he'd met. She'd be very attractive if she made half an effort, though he doubted many people really cared much for their appearance in this day and age, what with more important things to worry about. Thinking of Savannah like that, even for a split second, stirred up thoughts of Cameron. She'd always been stunning even without trying, without a moment's thought for her appearance other than how to blend in wherever she was going. It was funny, he thought, how seeing another woman made him instantly think of Cameron.

Savannah turned to them, a hard look in her eyes. "It's nearly dawn so we should stay here. I'll take first watch." She picked up her rifle once more and headed downstairs without another word. John watched her go, confused.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

Ellison shook his head sadly. "It's just how she is." He looked out of the window and watched as the inky blackness started to slowly fade into a dark grey over the horizon and the very tip of the sun rose above the fractured skyline; the beginnings of a dull red orb that started to cast a blood red hue over the distant landscape.

"First light," Ellison commented. "It'll be dawn in less than an hour; we're stuck here for the day. When it gets dark we'll move out."

"Move to where?" John asked.

"You'll see." Ellison took off his heavy brown overcoat and unclipped his webbing, then slung his rifle back over his shoulder and moved to the door. "Does this house have a shed in the back?"

"I don't know," John answered. He hadn't taken much notice when he'd briefly been in the back yard. He followed after Ellison and descended the staircase. There was no sign of Savannah but John saw that Ellison didn't seem worried. She was probably in the living room or something.

John and Ellison walked through the kitchen at the back of the house and opened the back door. "Should be safe enough in the yard," Ellison said, "HK would have to fly right over here to see us." In the back yard, sure enough, was a garden shed. It looked dilapidated to John, but then again he thought, what wasn't anymore? The pair of them took a quick look skywards, out of caution and force of habit. They strode towards it and John saw how right he was about the state of the shed; it was constructed of wooden panels that had partially rotted through in several places and turned green with mould in others. Holding the door shut was a simple padlock over a latch.

John took out his knife and jammed it into the weak wooden wall just next to the latch, then sawed the serrated edge through the half rotten plank. He yanked hard on the latch until it broke free from the shed, then he pulled the door open with ease, wincing as the rusty hinges creaked. He just had to hope there were no machines nearby to hear it.

They stepped inside and John switched on his small flashlight, sweeping it over the interior of the shed. "What're we looking for?" he asked.

Ellison stepped up to one of the walls and switched on his own light, shining it on a selection of garden tools hung up on hooks. Ellison selected two shovels and pulled them off the wall. "These will do," he replied simply.

"Do for what?" John asked as they left the shed and headed back into the house. He was seriously confused. Movement caught his attention as they entered the kitchen and he saw Savannah emerging from the living room. She leaned against the doorway, her rifle held in one arm and pointed at the ground. It was time to level with Ellison and Savannah, he thought, and tell them the score. "Weaver's got Cameron and John Henry." John once again noticed the look on Savannah's face at the very mention of Weaver: her eyes narrowed, her lips pursed and he noticed her jaw set. "I tried to get Cameron back but Weaver won't give her up unless I get another chip for John Henry. I'm gonna need your help to get one."

Ellison and Savannah shared a knowing look and nodded at each other. "We can do a bit more than that," Savannah said to him. John saw they knew something they weren't letting on, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what it was. Ellison opened his mouth and started to say something but Savannah stopped him, a small, sly smile spreading on her lips. "It'll be a surprise," she told him. "You'll find out tonight."

Allison and Kyle ran through the city with Mason and Briggs, the former pair right behind Cassie as the German Shepherd followed a scent. They'd followed John's scent to the HK crash site and had gone through the residential area, where Cassie had led them further east towards the outskirts of LA. The first rays of the sun were shining through the thick clouds of ash and dust high in the atmosphere, casting the sky crimson over the residential area of East LA.

"Guys, stop!" Kyle called out, pausing where he was and breathing deeply to catch his breath. He hadn't ran so far in ages and his whole body ached.

The others slowed down to a standstill and Allison called Cassie back to her, the dog instantly abandoning its trail and returning to her mistress's side, panting profusely as were her human companions.

"What's up?" Mason asked.

"The sun's up," Kyle said. "We can't follow any more, we have to find somewhere to lay up for the day."

Kyle saw the look of dismay on Allison's face as she huffed in annoyance. "We're onto him," she protested, "if we lay up now Cassie will lose his scent; we might never find him again."

"And if we *don't* lay up the machines will kill us and we'll *still* never find him."

"But-"

Kyle stepped up close to her and grasped her shoulders. Not roughly but firmly, as he looked into her eyes. "No buts, Allison. We've lost enough friends already; we're not losing any more by being reckless." She looked up at him and nodded, though he could tell from her face she was reluctant to stop. "We're gonna catch John, I promise. But we need to be smart about it. He's not alone anymore, we saw that at the crash site. He's got at least two others with him, probably Terminators. We can't afford to just run blindly into him or we'll get ourselves killed."

"Okay," she said, still reluctant.

"Good. Let's find somewhere to hunker down for the day," he told them. It wasn't hard; the residential area was still in reasonable shape and there were plenty of houses to choose from. They set up in one house, and after sweeping it clear of machines or other

people, laid their roll mats and sleeping bags out on the floor of the living room. Briggs took out a small field cooker and set it up on the floor. He lit it up as Kyle and Mason took out their mess tins and poured water from their canteens into them. Kyle took out a foil wrapper from his pack and opened it, revealing reddish brown chunks of dried meat. He tore a strip off and started to eat it, his stomach growled gratefully for the small amount of food. Mason and Briggs dug food from their own packs and started to eat as they waited for their water to heat up. Boiling the water served the dual purpose of killing any nasty bugs as well as giving them something hot to drink.

"I'll take first watch," Allison said. She left the others and headed up the stairs with Cassie. She entered what had once been a children's bedroom and sat on one of the single beds against the front window. She set her pack down and placed her assault rifle on the bed next to her. Cassie jumped up onto the bed and nuzzled into Allison's chest. "Good girl," she hugged the dog into her and stroked the top of her head and her back, causing Cassie to roll onto her back on Allison's lap. She smiled down at her four legged companion and rubbed Cassie's belly and chest. She looked down at Cassie and then out the window. Somewhere out there, not too far away, were John Connor and his accomplices. Kyle was right; he'd met up with two other people, as far as they could tell from the footprints left behind. One a man and the other a woman, judging from the size of one pair of prints.

"You're out there, you bastard," she muttered under her breath, still rubbing Cassie's belly unconsciously. "We'll find you."

John, Ellison and Savannah marched silently through the outskirts of Los Angeles. All three had their weapons shouldered, and their eyes and ears open for any signs of machines nearby. John breathed out and saw a puff of steam emerge as his warm breath met the freezing air. He didn't see any such steam coming from Savannah in front of

him and resolved to breathe through his nose like she was. He didn't know if the warm air from their breath could give them away or not but he figured she wasn't taking any chances.

He looked at Savannah as she steadily marched forward in front of him, and found himself more and more intrigued by her. Apart from the red hair and the freckles she had nothing in common with the Savannah he'd met before. He wanted to talk to her, find out more about her, but it was too dangerous whilst they were on the move and she didn't seem very talkative anyway, from what he'd seen.

They marched down a road that ran by a cemetery right at the city's limits, still in silence. It was the same place they'd buried Derek's ashes, John noted, except the rolling green hills were a muddy brown where the grass had died and rotted away a long time ago. Savannah paused and shot out her fist to the side of her head. John saw the motion and stopped dead, followed by Ellison behind him. "Centaur," she whispered harshly, though John couldn't hear anything. Savannah pointed ahead and then at the wall of the cemetery. A moment later she dashed across the road, faster than John expected her to, and jumped at the cemetery wall, hauling herself up over the eight foot wall and flattening herself against the top as she swung over and disappeared from view.

"Come on," Ellison whispered and followed after her. John heard the low rumbling of tracks in the distance ahead and didn't hesitate to run after Ellison. The older man leaned against the wall and crouched down, linking his hands together in front of his groin. John nodded in understanding and stepped on the palms of Ellison's interlaced hands. The former agent straightened his knees and stood straight, lifting John up so he could reach the top of the wall. John swung one leg over the wall, looked over to see Savannah waiting below, and reached down to pull Ellison up. He was surprised at how spry Ellison was for a man of sixty or so. Both John and Ellison dropped down behind the wall and lay down flat against it, concealed in the darkness from view.

The rumbling of tracks got louder, accompanied by a metallic squeaking of metal on metal as the Centaur got closer. Even behind the wall John didn't dare move. The three of them waited, remaining statue still but preparing to run should the mammoth patrol machine open fire at them. John looked out towards the cemetery and saw HKs flying out in the distance, perhaps a mile or two away and casting their search beams over East LA. He hoped and prayed to whatever deities were out there that none of them flew in their direction.

The Centaur rolled by the cemetery wall and continued down the road, its tracks chewed up the asphalt and tarmac under the tremendous weight of the machine. John waited for the sound to fade to almost nothing before he started to pull himself up.

Savannah shot her hand out again and grabbed John, pulling him to the ground beside her. She crawled on top of him and flattened herself on his stomach.

"What-"

Savannah clamped her hand down over his mouth and pressed her forehead into his, so even in the darkness he could see the intense glare she was shooting at him. *"Shhh,"* she pointed to a small hole in the wall, a few inches above the ground and barely the size of John's fist. He turned his head towards it and watched, trying to ignore the fact Savannah was still lying on top of him with her hand pressed to his mouth. He watched and waited, wondering what the hell she was doing.

After a couple of minutes John heard more sounds. Metal clipping on the ground repeatedly, regularly: footsteps, he realised. Through the hole he saw machines marching on the far side of the road, or their legs at least. Endos, patrolling in the same direction the Centaur had travelled.

Savannah lay still on top of John, not moving an inch. After what John figured must have been several minutes Savannah rolled off of

John, stood up and held her hand down to him. She pulled him up to his feet and made sure he was looking at her. "Always wait after a Centaur passes by," she warned him. "Endos are never far behind." She turned away from John and marched towards the rows of headstones. *How the hell is this stupid kid meant to save us all?* She wondered. He clearly had some survival skills but it wasn't enough. Either John Connor had some other talents they hadn't seen yet or Ellison had severely exaggerated the kid's importance. Either way she wasn't finding herself particularly overwhelmed by John so far.

She led the way through rows upon rows of graves, treading carefully and making sure she didn't step on anything that would make a sound or alert anyone or anything out there to their presence.

"What're we doing here?" John asked quietly.

"You'll see," Ellison simply said. They headed for another section of the cemetery, far from the road they'd entered from, and to John the place felt even more massive at night.

Eventually Savannah stopped at a grave halfway down a gently rolling hill. John stepped in front of it and saw the name etched onto it: *Amelia Kearns.*

"Who's that?" John asked as Ellison unclipped his pack, dropping the shovels he'd taken from the shed to the ground.

"It's a name I'd remember," Ellison explained, "one that couldn't be traced to you or your mother." He tossed a shovel to John. "Start digging," he said. Savannah knelt down on one knee and kept watch as John and Ellison started to dig into the ground. John had no idea why the hell they were at a cemetery, digging graves. The whole thing just felt so wrong and creepy as hell.

It took a while, but after an eternity of digging and sweating and grunting, they'd made it down several feet and were standing over a heavy wooden coffin. Ellison ushered John to the side, pushing him

away from the coffin while he crouched down, took out his knife and jammed it under the lid. "What're you doing?" John asked, incredulous.

Ellison moved the knife back and forth, up and down, and slid his fingers underneath the lid.

"This is just wrong," John shook his head. He wouldn't have thought the pair of them were into grave robbing but that's exactly what this looked like. Why the hell had they brought him here?

Ellison grunted and heaved, pulling the lid up, until the nails worked loose and he flipped it up. Dust erupted all over them and John resisted the urge to cough in case anything out there was listening. John peered inside as the dust settled and his eyes widened in complete disbelief at the sight of the body below, perfectly preserved, as if she were only asleep.

"Cameron?" John's mouth opened in utter confusion as he gawped at the still, peacefully inert form of his protector, laid on her back with her eyes closed and her hands resting on her chest. He reached down and grasped one of her petite hands in his, stroking his thumb over the smooth skin, unblemished. She felt cold to touch, almost like a corpse, from being buried beneath the ground for so long, he supposed. What amazed him was her face; when he'd last seen her she'd been missing an eye and half her face had been blasted away by gunfire, but now it was as if she'd never been shot in the first place. Somehow she'd either been repaired or the skin had healed. John reached out with one hand and opened up her eyelids, revealing an intact, white and chocolate-brown orb.

He'd been so worried he'd never see her again, that he'd spend the rest of his life searching through this post-apocalyptic world for her. Seeing her now, in one piece, lifted a huge weight off his shoulders, though not all of it: he still needed her chip. *At least I'm one step closer.*

As John lifted her hand up he saw the glint of something underneath her. He reached under and felt the familiar cold round metal of a gun barrel.

"Here," Ellison grabbed Cameron's arms and pulled her body up and out of the coffin, hoisting her up onto the ground above, at Savannah's feet. She looked down at Cameron, then at John.

"Can't believe you came through time for a tin can," she snorted then turned back to watching out for any movement. John looked down at the coffin Cameron once occupied and shined his flashlight down into it. Buried with Cameron was a small arsenal: HK-417 battle rifle, AK-47s, pistols, grenade launchers, even a full belt fed machine gun. Ellison reached down and handed the HK-417 to John.

"These are for you," he said. He handed John boxes of ammunition with half a dozen empty magazines. John immediately and almost unconsciously opened the box and started to load rounds into the magazines. "They're presents from your mother," Ellison finished.

John looked up at Ellison as he mentioned his mom. He'd been ashamed to say that he'd been so busy struggling to survive that he'd hardly thought of her at all. John looked down at the armoury below, then back up to the former agent. "Ellison: what happened to my mom?"

Thunder growled loudly in the dark grey, stormy clouds that loomed over Los Angeles. It crackled and smashed, and lightning cut through the air violently, illuminating the darkening sky for the briefest of flashes as it struck like an angry god, threatening its creations below. The heavens opened up and poured down on the city, so heavy it was practically a monsoon.

A lone vehicle stood with the lights off in an alleyway in a broken, run down part of the city, its windscreen wipers were set to max, rapidly

swiping left to right and back, but were barely able to keep the glass clear for more than a second before it was saturated with heavy, fat raindrops once more. Two occupants sat inside, tired, bored, and nervous. The power had been restored in LA, making it much harder for them to slip by unnoticed.

"I don't think he's gonna show," Sarah said, tilting her head back on the headrest.

"Give it some time," Ellison replied calmly.

"We've been here for three hours," said Sarah. "Malenkov played us, it happens. We should go."

Ellison shook his head and took another bite of the double cheeseburger he'd bought just before they'd parked up for their meet with Malenkov's men. It was three and a half hours cold, but it was energy rich food and just the act of eating something helped stave off the boredom for a few seconds. "You've never been on a stakeout, then," he turned to her after he'd swallowed the mouthful of burger. "I've had to wait a lot longer than this. Don't worry, I know Malenkov: he'll show."

"That's something else," Sarah met his look with a doubtful one of her own. "How do we know he's not setting us up? He'd have a lot to gain by selling us out to the feds."

"He'd have more to *lose,"* Ellison said. He took another mouthful of his burger then sucked down some soda from his extra large drink. One thing he'd learnt early on in the FBI: you never ate healthy during a stakeout or if waiting for a contact. Fast food was the standard issue for covert surveillance. He finished off his drink, careful not to slurp the last of it – he knew from experience that some people were very irritable when cooped up in a car or a room for a long time, and the smallest things like slurping a drink or smacking your lips when you ate could grate on their nerves. Ellison didn't doubt for a second that Sarah was one of those people who didn't like keeping still for long.

"Malenkov's position relies on a lot of trust," he finally continued. "If word got around that he'd sold out a client to the FBI, if they knew he was in touch with the bureau at all, there'd be a contract on his head before you could blink. It's why the FBI only asks him for information on any customers who'd pose a threat to national security."

"In their eyes that's *us,"* Sarah countered.

"Just give it some time," Ellison said.

They waited and waited and the rain poured down even harder, like a monsoon. It came down so hard and so thick that they could barely make out anything past a few metres. It would be perfect for them to go unnoticed, Sarah thought, but that also applied to anyone else following them. Sarah looked out of the windscreen and her window, straining her eyes to spot any signs of movement in the distance; searching for a SWAT team, covert surveillance, or even a lone assassin. She couldn't see anyone outside but that didn't mean they weren't there. A Terminator could easily have eyes on them from further away, whilst staying out of sight. She wouldn't have thought a Triple-Eight would be conducting surveillance on them but then again she'd once thought a machine would never protect, or do such mundane jobs as collecting refined coltan. There was so much she didn't know, she felt like she was at a constant disadvantage.

Something moved down the alleyway and both Sarah and Ellison shot up, alert and eyes forward in unison. Sarah reached down instinctively for her pistol but Ellison put his hand on her arm to hold her steady. Through the rain emerged the shape of a van, slowly inching its way towards them. It stopped twenty feet from them and its lights flashed on once, bathing them in light for a brief moment. They flicked on again, twice in rapid succession.

"That's the signal," Ellison he opened door and stepped out. Sarah exited from her side a moment later. "Wish they'd parked closer," he said as the rain instantly saturated his suit and shirt. Sarah quickly became equally as soaked but she didn't complain; after years in South America, where they had monsoons every day like clockwork,

the rain didn't bother her. Together they stepped towards the van. Sarah's pistol was in her hand, not willing to take any chances. Two men stepped out of the vehicle, both large, leather clad men with hard faces and harder eyes. The look of men who'd have about as few issues killing them as a Terminator would.

"You have the merchandise?" Sarah asked.

"Da," one of the men replied, his eastern-European accent thick and heavy. "You have the money?" She noticed both of them carried pistols in their hands.

Ellison held up a large brown paper envelope for them to see. "Fifteen thousand," he said; the rest of the $45,000 payment they'd agreed with Malenkov.

"Come," one of them said. Sarah moved forward but signalled for Ellison to stay back. She still didn't trust these guys and she wouldn't until they had the weapons they'd come for in their car and they were gone. One of the men opened the van's rear doors and turned a light on in the back. He pulled back a tarp to reveal the array of weapons she'd selected. Sarah glanced across the small arsenal, making sure everything they'd asked for was there. Unexpectedly, it was all present. There were two extraneous items also placed behind the long shapes of the machine gun and the rocket launcher. She recognised them of course; two sets of body armour.

The first leather-clad heavy saw what she was looking at. "A gift from Mr Malenkov," he said. "He likes you."

"I'll bet," Sarah replied quietly. She remembered what he'd said to her as she'd left, if they had bad luck they wouldn't be around to buy more weapons. He was expecting a repeat purchase. With any luck they wouldn't need to; if they couldn't stop Skynet and Kaliba with all this then there was just no stopping them at all. "Its all here," Sarah called out to Ellison. The former agent came up and whistled at the sight of all the weapons in front of them.

The four of them quickly and carefully transferred the weapons from the back of the van to the Mercedes' trunk, which was so full by the time they'd finished that the rear suspension was weighed down slightly. Ellison handed over the envelope and one of the heavies counted the cash whilst the other held his pistol at his side.

"It's all here," he concluded after taking a few moments to double check it. The two men turned round without another word and got into their van. Seconds later it grumbled to life and pulled away, disappearing in the dark and the rain once more, as if it had never been there. A very wet Sarah and Ellison returned back to the Mercedes and got inside.

"That went well," Sarah said, surprised.

"You should have more faith."

"Faith isn't part of my programming," Sarah deliberately echoed Cameron's words to her long ago, a slight smile on her face despite herself. Ellison caught it and looked at her. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"It's something Cameron said once, that faith wasn't part of her programming. I think it's the one thing we had in common."

"Other than John," Ellison supplied.

Sarah nodded wistfully. "Other than that." She started the engine and pulled off, leaving the alleyway and heading back onto the main road. She kept her speed steady; the last thing in the world they wanted was to be stopped by the police with a trunk full of military grade weaponry.

Sarah drove on through the quiet roads and patiently navigated the city, keeping her eyes peeled for any police cars around. She flicked her eyes up to look in the rear view mirror every few seconds and took note of every car behind her. Sarah turned right at the next intersection and she noticed a grey SUV a few cars behind them. It

followed them right and Sarah's lips pursed in anticipation. Was this another tail? Were Kaliba onto them again?

She turned right again and watched in the mirror as the SUV continued on its way. Either it wasn't following them or the driver had caught her counter surveillance trick and had pulled away, radioing their position and direction for another team to follow. She carried on turning right until she'd gone a full turn around the block. She didn't see any cars that stood out behind them. She carried on her way, occasionally pulled more counter surveillance tricks to throw off any followers, until she reached her destination. She pulled up outside the same church where she and John had asked for sanctuary and hidden from Cameron, stepped outside the car and up to the entrance, once again ignoring the pouring rain.

They stepped inside and Sarah saw Father Bonilla clearing up, preparing to leave for the night. He saw her and his eyes narrowed for a moment until he saw past the blonde hair and glasses, and recognised her. He stared at her in shock.

"You," he said, still in disbelief. "I never thought I would see you again. The police and FBI are looking for you."

"I know," she said, a slight hint of apology in her voice. "I explained to you what I'm trying to stop; I need your help one more time."

Bonilla smiled sadly but shook his head at her. "If what you told me is true, then I wish you luck. I'll pray to God to keep you safe, but this is not my fight. I have no more money to give you, I have nothing else."

"It's true," Ellison stepped forward. "I've seen it with my own eyes; everything she told you is true." He fingered his own cross. "I'm a man of faith too, Father. I've seen and done things I never thought I would, because of all this. So have you. You know it's all real." Bonilla had never actually seen a Terminator, as far as Ellison knew. And he had no idea what Sarah was even thinking; she hadn't filled him in on this part – or any other – of her plan, assuming of course

she even had one. Part of him thought she was playing it by ear but he'd stick with her. He indeed was a man of faith, and he was placing all of said belief in Sarah.

"I told you about my daughter," Sarah said.

"The girl who broke you out of prison: yes."

Sarah looked down at the ground, her eyes downtrodden. "She died breaking me out. I need to bury her."

Bonilla breathed out a sigh of relief. He was afraid she would ask him to become more involved with what she was doing, and was glad that wasn't the case again. Then he felt a sudden surge of guilt that he'd felt relief at the news of her child's death. Very un-Christian, he chided himself. "I am sorry," he said to Sarah, genuine sadness in his eyes. The death of a child was always the most tragic. The fact her daughter was caught up in their struggle made it even more so. He'd had to console several families in the area who'd lost loved ones around her age, serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it never grew easier.

"How did she die?" he asked.

"She was shot. She bled out after we'd gotten away. Father, we need to bury her; can you help me with that?"

"I can give you the number of a funeral parlour, they will-"

"I can't," Sarah said firmly. "I told you there are people out there who want this world to burn, they're looking for me. So are the FBI and the police. If any of them find me then everything I told you – Judgement Day, the machines, the end of the world – *will* happen. I can't take the risk. I need you to do it."

"And her body?" Bonilla asked.

"We've got her," Ellison replied. Bonilla looked at her, surprised and a little disturbed that they'd kept her dead daughter's body at home. She needed to be laid to rest.

"She's one of *them,"* Sarah told him. "A machine."

"Why do you wish to bury a machine?" Bonilla asked.

"She was like a daughter to me. And if anyone gets their hands on her the world could end a lot sooner." Sarah knew they couldn't keep Cameron's body in Ellison's house indefinitely. It wasn't safe out of their sight and they couldn't very well drag her with them everywhere they went. They had to keep her hidden and the best place for that was six feet under.

"We'll pay you," Sarah pulled out a small wad of notes.

Bonilla shook his head at her and pushed her hand away gently. "I don't need the money." He paused to look at her and Ellison. "I'll help you, but this will be the last time." He wrote the church phone number down on a sliver of paper and handed it to Sarah. "Call me tomorrow, and I'll have something arranged for you."

Chapter 9

Cemeteries: rolling green fields where the dead are laid to rest, marked out with stone, granite or marble headstones, engraved so that those who came to pay their respects, or simply passers-by, can identify the deceased beneath the ground. Ironically a place filled with death, both old and recent, was also one of the most tranquil and serene places in all of Los Angeles. Only a few people strolled through the Cemetery; a few people come to pay their respects and visit the graves of loved ones. The older graves, worn and weathered by time and the elements, stood neglected, little more than part of the scenery; those who'd mourned their occupants long since having departed themselves.

Another grave had been dug; a normal occurrence in the cemetery; the circle of life and death so unending that new ones were dug all the time. A funeral took place halfway down a gentle slope in the cemetery, though anyone who saw it in passing might wander who was so unpopular as to only have four people present at their burial – one of those being the priest conducting the ceremony.

Sarah stood beside Ellison, who held Savannah's hand as they looked on at the coffin before them. Father Bonilla stood at the head of the casket and read a passage from his bible. Sarah didn't recognise it – not having been to any funerals herself barring the one for the Desert Heat and Air workers, and she'd been too busy looking for leads to bother listening to the droning on about the life everlasting after death. Not that she really believed in any of that stuff, anyway.

All three of them were dressed in black – not difficult for Ellison, whose time in the Bureau had shaped his wardrobe as such, though Sarah had had to go shopping once more for outfits for herself and Savannah – something she'd hated every minute of and found

herself constantly looking over her shoulder. Even with the cover of newly blonde hair and a pair of reading glasses or sunglasses, and a hat, she'd felt every pair of eyes boring down on her, convinced somebody would recognise her.

Savannah looked down at the coffin, a deep sadness etched into her face and a pink puffiness in her eyes, which were on the verge of tears. Sarah noticed the girl's face and leaned down to whisper. "She's just sleeping."

Savannah looked up at Sarah and shook her head. "That's what everyone said about Daddy," she replied sadly. People said he was sleeping but she knew he wasn't coming back.

"She really is sleeping," Sarah told her. She squeezed the tiny hand that Ellison wasn't holding and crouched down. "Did your daddy ever tell you the story of Sleeping Beauty?" Savannah nodded slowly.

"Well that's what this is: Cameron's going to sleep for a long time, and my son John's going to find her one day and wake her up." She knew that's what would happen, whether she stopped the war or not, John would find Cameron. He'd find her chip and he'd get her back. Her son was like a bulldog with a bone in its mouth when he set his mind to something; nothing would get in his way.

"Is he going to kiss her?" Savannah asked. That was how the prince woke up Sleeping Beauty in the story.

Sarah choked and spluttered at Savannah's question. It was completely innocent but the thought of John and Cameron... she wrestled the thought out of her head. She'd literally had no choice but to accept John's feelings for Cameron and let him go, but she didn't even want to think about how that might actually play out when he found her. The amount of time John had spent with her lately had been worrying. "He'd better not," Sarah mumbled to herself.

Savannah looked up to Ellison for confirmation. "She's right," he told her. "John's going to wake Cameron up, years from now. But until

then she has to sleep."

Sarah smiled to herself when Savannah seemed satisfied with their explanation. She let go of Savannah's hand, stood back up and approached Father Bonilla, who'd been performing the funeral despite the fact none of the three 'mourners' had listened to a word he'd said. He closed his bible and held it in both hands in front of him, his head bowed.

"Are they in there?" Sarah asked him quietly.

"Yes, she is buried with all the weapons you gave me. I kept the coffin closed so nobody would see them." Father Bonilla had worked tirelessly since Sarah had asked for his help once more. He'd called the local funeral directors, who'd only been able to supply a large coffin for a man twice Cameron's size. He'd called Sarah to tell her and she'd been perfectly happy with that. When she'd driven to his church again with a trunk full of weaponry he'd then placed all the guns underneath and around Cameron's body. He'd been aghast at the sight of the metal skull underneath the delicate girlish features and had muttered away in quiet prayer as he'd worked. He'd never imagined such things could exist, nor that he'd be helping a woman to bury such a machine alongside a small armoury. They'd not covered anything like that when he'd been training for the priesthood, but despite her record and reputation, Father Bonilla sensed Sarah was a good person. He believed her and believed what she was trying to do was right, which was why he'd agreed to help her one more time.

They watched as the coffin descended into the hole in the ground and stood sentinel as the earth was piled into the grave, filling it up. Once the soil was patted down over the fresh grave, Father Bonilla had one more question to ask. "The headstone won't be ready for another two weeks; I don't know the girl's name." Sarah had never mentioned her 'daughter's' name to him before.

Sarah paused for a moment. She wondered if she should use a name John would recognise. 'Cameron Baum' could be too easily

traced, as could the surnames 'Reese' and 'Phillips." She tried to think of something else, something John would be able to pick up if he saw it.

"Amelia Kearns," Ellison told the priest. "Make up the birth date."

Sarah looked at him strangely. "Who's that?"

"First girl I dated in high school," he replied. "The name can't be linked to you, John or Cameron, and unless someone's stalked me since I was fourteen, they won't connect it to me either."

"Not bad," Sarah muttered. "Do it," she told Bonilla, "Amelia Kearns. Make up something nice to write on the stone, too." Sarah nodded and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you," she said. "We won't ask you for anything else." Bonilla had done so much for her already, but it wasn't his war and she wouldn't involve him in it. It wasn't fair on him. It was her burden – hers and Ellison's she reminded herself, still unused to the fact she had a partner in crime now – and it she wouldn't put it on anyone else's shoulders.

Sarah turned from the grave and led Ellison and Savannah away from it and Father Bonilla, resolving that she'd never see him again.

Sarah put her fork back down on the empty plate and savoured the sweet, spicy taste of the crispy chilli chicken and noodles. She sat back at the table, full now, and reflected that she hadn't eaten a proper meal in days. Not since John had gone. She'd picked through Ellison's fridge or bought a sandwich, but she hadn't actually eaten a full meal and she couldn't help but let out a small, gratified moan as she finished her plate.

"That good, huh?" Ellison asked as he picked delicately at his sweet and sour pork, and Savannah next to him did the same with hers. Both of them were only halfway through their meals, unlike Sarah

who'd demolished hers as fast as possible. "Surprised you even tasted it, it went down that fast."

"It's the training," she explained. One of the first things she'd learnt in South America. "We had to eat fast in case something came up and we had to move; we never knew when we'd get the chance again."

Ellison shrugged at it and looked down at Savannah, who'd been extremely quiet during and since the fake funeral. "You okay?"

Savannah just nodded and took another small bite of her food. She wasn't really hungry and started idly pushing the food around on the plate. "I want to go home," she said sadly. She missed her mommy, her bed and her toys. She even missed school; she hadn't seen her friends in a long time.

"It's not safe," Sarah said softly, surprising Ellison at the gentle tone of her voice. Savannah simply nodded and stared into space, pushing her plate away to show she was finished despite half the meal remaining. She didn't pout or cry or argue, and it broke Sarah's heart; most kids would have screamed or begged until they got what she wanted, but Savannah had just quietly accepted it. She wondered what living with an emotionless, cold machine for however long, and thinking it was her mother would do to a kid that young. She probably never answered back because she was too scared to.

"Savannah, can you leave me and Mr Ellison alone for a moment? Go upstairs and run a bath, I'll see you up there in a minute." Savannah nodded once and left Ellison's kitchen to head to the living room. Once she was gone and hopefully out of earshot, Sarah turned to her opposite, still slowly eating his sweet and sour pork.

"We're heading back to Zieracorp tonight."

Ellison finished chewing his food and swallowed before making his reply. "Why?" he asked. "Kaliba – if those guys were Kaliba-"

"They were," Sarah interrupted.

"Well, they're going to be crawling all over that place. What do you want to go in there for anyway?"

"We need information," Sarah said simply. "We're pretty sure Kaliba's working with Skynet, or for it – you said John Henry had a brother, so that must be it. But that's *all* we know right now. We don't know where they are, what they're doing, or how many of them there are. I promised John I'd stop Judgement Day but I don't even know where to start. We gotta get in there and find out what we can as soon as possible."

Ellison looked at Sarah for a moment, realising she was right. He sat in silence for a minute as he continued to finish his meal off then washed it down with the rest of his glass of diet soda as Sarah watched him impatiently.

"You done?" she asked. Apparently they didn't have a sense of urgency in the FBI – probably why they hadn't caught her since she'd broken out of Pescadero.

Ellison put his glass down and nodded. "You said it yourself," he nodded down at his now-empty plate, "you never know when you might get to eat next."

Sarah ran her fingers through Savannah's hair, gently working the shampoo into it and looking down at the girl, still so quiet. "Did your mommy ever do this with you?" Sarah asked. *Shit,* she admonished herself for using past tense – she didn't want Savannah to think her mother wasn't coming back – no kid should ever have to lose their parents at that age.

"She used to," Savannah replied quietly.

"Used to? How long ago was that?"

"Before Daddy died," she said.

"How did he die?" Sarah asked. She could practically see the cops one day discovering the real Catherine Weaver and her husband, run through by blades and dumped in a ditch or in the sewer somewhere.

"He was flying, he crashed," Savannah said with a sniffle. Sarah decided to stop that line of questioning; she didn't want to upset her any more. It was hard enough being dragged into hiding like this even for herself and Ellison, let alone a little girl.

Savannah leaned back into the bath and rinsed her own hair without Sarah's help. She then took a cloth and started to wash herself. Sarah wondered how long ago Savannah Weaver had been unwittingly orphaned, how long she'd lived with a machine that hadn't the first clue how to look after a child, for Savannah to start acting so independently like that. "Hey, think fast!" Sarah scooped up some of the bubbles in one hand and slathered them on Savannah's face before she could react. Savannah looked up at her in surprise, with bubbles sticking to her jaw and chin, but she continued and picked up more bubbles. "Guess I better do the other side, too," she said as she put more on, creating a bubble-beard. She picked up a mirror from the windowsill by the sink and showed Savannah.

Savannah giggled in glee at the sight of herself, and Sarah had to admit she was enjoying spending time with Savannah, doing things a mother would do. She'd missed out on things like this with John but she'd give Savannah at least a semblance of being a kid for as long as she could. She wondered if maybe John had a point when he'd said he'd never had a chance to live his life. Maybe she should have let him enjoy the time they had for a while, even just some time off once in a while. She wasn't going to make the same mistake with Savannah.

After a few more minutes of Savannah splashing in the tub Sarah got her out, gave her a towel and let her dry herself off. Once Savannah was dry and dressed Sarah took her downstairs and into Ellison's

living room. Savannah sat down on the sofa and Sarah gave her the TV remote. Sarah watched as Savannah channel surfed, looking to find something she wanted to see. She went into Ellison's kitchen and looked around for snacks. She found a large bottle of coke, some chips, popcorn, and a tub of ice cream. She pulled out the ice cream, noting that it was chocolate, and took it and a spoon to Savannah. The girl was very independent for her age, and Sarah knew that was what she needed her to be right now.

"Find anything good?" she asked. Savannah seemed to be glued to some show or film with a girl singing. She'd seen it in passing but had no idea what it was – Hannah-something-or-other. Savannah nodded and despite her earlier claims of being full, her eyes widened as Sarah passed her the tub of ice cream. She eagerly ripped the lid off and started to dig in, so quickly and carelessly that some of it missed and smeared against her chin. Sarah couldn't help but smile at it.

"Me and Mr Ellison are going to go out for a few hours, are you going to be okay here?"

Savannah nodded absently, immersed in the ice cream and the TV. "When we're gone, don't answer the door to anyone; understand?"

"Okay," she replied.

"Good girl." Sarah ruffled Savannah's red hair affectionately then left the living room. She opened the front door and saw Ellison already waiting in the driver's seat of the Mercedes. Sarah made sure she locked the door behind her and got into the car. Ellison calmly pulled off and drove through the streets, heading towards Downtown.

"Think we did the right thing, leaving Savannah alone?" he asked.

"We can't exactly take her with us," Sarah said. Not just because it was dangerous but she didn't want Savannah to see and go through everything John had. Not unless she had to.

They reached the Downtown area of Los Angeles and the giant skyscrapers loomed over them menacingly. The night air was pitch black and illuminated by tens of thousands of lights – both street lights and those in offices still occupied despite the lateness of the evening – that served to remind Sarah the electricity was back on, and with it the myriad surveillance cameras that littered the city.

Ellison drove further through Downtown and before long the Zeiracorp tower emerged into view, towering over them but with a stark difference between it and the other skyscrapers: *all* the lights in Zieracorp were off, and even in the dark Sarah managed to make out the burnt black hole in the side of the tower at the top where the drone had crashed. Sarah couldn't help but think that if they didn't stop Skynet before Judgement Day, the rest of LA would be as dark and lifeless as the tower.

"Drive by the front entrance," Sarah told Ellison. He turned off towards the building and drove steadily forward. He didn't speed up or slow down as they drove before the front of Zeiracorp but maintained a steady speed and concentrated solely on the road while Sarah stared out her window at the building. He'd done surveillance before and knew that a drive-by observation had to be done precisely. Drive too fast and you might miss something; drive too slow and someone watching might catch on to what you're doing.

Sarah looked out of her window intently at the inert building. As it had seemed from afar, the tower was completely dark and the crash site at the top was a mess of burnt and broken metal and concrete, blackened and charred by fire and smoke. Sarah saw black and yellow police tape wrapped around the front entrance, sealing it off from the public. She couldn't see any of the SWAT guys who'd been there the other day but then again they'd stick out, she thought. Chances were the same guys were probably staking out the area in plain clothes right now. They drove past the entrance to the underground employee parking lot and Sarah noticed the gate had been rammed down at some point. She couldn't make out anything

else from the outside and within seconds they'd driven past the building.

"Where's the nearest parking lot?" Sarah asked.

"Employee parking but that's probably guarded," Ellison replied. "Other than that you're looking a few blocks away."

Sarah thought for a moment. "Turn right," she instructed Ellison as they approached the intersection. Ellison did as he was told and turned to the right, driving steadily in their new direction.

"What're we looking for?" Ellison asked.

"Alleyway," Sarah said, pointing up ahead to the right. They drove up by the block and they saw the entrance to the alley that bisected the block. Ellison signalled to turn into it but Sarah gripped the wheel and held it firm. "Keep going," she told him. She'd spotted the alleyway, that'd do for now. "Find somewhere nearby to park."

Ellison drove on down past several more blocks before finding a multi-storey parking lot. They parked up on the second floor and Ellison made to open the trunk but Sarah stopped him.

"We don't need the rifles," she told him.

"Seriously?" Ellison raised his eyebrow at her. "Why did we just spend forty-five grand on enough guns to invade a small country if we don't need them?"

Sarah pulled out her Glock 17 and pulled back the topslide slightly, checking there was a round chambered. She released it with a metallic *click* and looked at him. "I've got two spare magazines; you?"

Ellison opened the glove compartment and pulled out a SIG P226, plus two spare magazines. "Same," he replied.

Sarah gestured at the assault rifles in the back. "We can't walk around out in the open with them and if we get to the point where we need assault rifles we're screwed anyway. This is just recon," she told him. Skynet wasn't here; she'd found that out very well the last time she was here. But there might be something they could find that might tell them about Kaliba – Ellison didn't know anything about them but Sarah couldn't believe Weaver would be ignorant. She knew something and she resolved to find out whatever she could.

They left the car, locked it and made their way down the stairwell, ignoring the handful of drunk vagrants staggering around and talking in groups, to themselves, or to whatever invisible pink dragons happened to be floating around. Both Sarah and Ellison screwed up their faces as they passed by one drunken man sat in a corner with a bottle of cheap vodka in a plastic carrier bag; he stank of urine and body odour. Sarah kept a close eye on him for a second, making sure he actually was drunk. The sudden thought came to her that a tramp was the perfect disguise; a cop or fed or someone working for Kaliba could easily pose as a vagrant, pretend to be shitfaced drunk, and watch their movements. There could easily be a camera in the bag with the vodka. Or a gun. Sarah took in his features; his weather beaten leathery skin, his scraggly grey beard and his torn blue jeans with filthy grey sweater. If she saw the same man again anywhere else but on their return visit she knew to put him down.

"How're we going to get inside?" Ellison asked her. "There are security cameras around every entrance, and if there are people inside they'll see us breaking in.

The vagrant behind them belched and threw his bottle of empty vodka against a concrete pillar, shattering it with a loud crash of glass and catching Sarah's attention. She turned around and approached him.

"Wha' the fuck you want?" the man slurred at Sarah, revealing broken stumps of brown teeth and rancid breath that reeked of alcohol. There was no way, she realised, that this guy was posing as

a drunk. If he was then he deserved an Oscar for the effort he was putting in. Even his skin stank of booze.

Sarah reached into her jeans pocked and pulled out her purse. She opened it and pulled out a $50 bill, holding it up in front of the vagrant. "How'd you like to make fifty bucks?" she asked.

The tramp stared at her, then Ellison, and finally at the money. His alcohol addled brain trying to decide if he'd heard her right or not. He was wasted, but not so far gone that he couldn't work out that fifty dollars could buy him a lot more juice. He grinned, revealing his rotten teeth once more, and let out a throaty chuckle as he slowly, unsteadily dragged himself up off the ground and onto his feet. "What you want me to do?"

Knowles sat back in his chair behind the security desk, an array of screens displayed images from several points throughout the building: outside the main entrance, inside the lobby, all of the fire exits and the inside of the employee parking lot. Nothing showed up, just the same still images over and over again. Knowles sighed and took a sip from his cup of coffee, scowling as he realised the drink was cold. He was bored, seriously bored. He was supposed to be protecting Danny Dyson while he worked on God-only-knew what, but Danny was safe and secure down in the basement and had shown he was far happier without Knowles and his team bothering him.

There weren't any cameras in the basement, apparently Zieracorp's most secret work had been conducted there, but Danny had a radio and could easily enough call for them if he needed anything. In the last two days though, Knowles hadn't heard a peep from the young man, and only saw him when he personally went to hand him some food twice a day and check on his progress. Not that anything Danny said about his work meant a damn thing to Knowles anyway; his

trade was in bullets and blades, and Danny's was in circuits and microchips.

Knowles put down his coffee and took a bite of the sandwich he'd taken from the vending machine, and thought about the differences between them. He'd seen Danny's Porsche 911 and the tailored suits, and wondered if he'd made the right career choices in his life. *Maybe I'll take a computer course after this job's over,* he thought to himself. Not that he was paid badly of course; Kaliba had contracted him for five hundred dollars a day; twice the rate a lot of guys on the circuit earned. But Danny's trade clearly made a lot more money for a lot less hardship.

Movement on one of the screens caught his eye and Knowles put down the sandwich as he focused on the display. Someone was outside the fire exit C, on the rear of the ground floor. Knowles pressed a couple of keys on the console and the camera zoomed in on the man. Knowles breathed easy as he saw the man; it was just a bum, probably wasted out of his skull. Knowles watched with interest as the man staggered towards the fire exit door and leaned his head against it. Knowles wasn't worried; the door couldn't be opened from the outside.

The bum unzipped his flies and started to take a piss against the door, swaying drunkenly as he did so; the camera resolution was high enough that Knowles could see he was splashing himself as he peed. "Winos," he chuckled and rolled his eyes as the man was too drunk to realise he was spattering himself with his own piss.

The bum pulled something out of his jacket and Knowles' eyes narrowed. The vagrant pulled out a lead pipe from under his jacket and turned towards the security camera – not realising his zip was still undone. The image shook as the bum smashed the pipe into the camera, and then again as he struck it a second time. He swung the pipe a third time and the camera went dead.

"Son of a bitch," Knowles growled as he got up from his seat. "Skinner, report to the security office," he said into his radio. He

picked up his HK G-36 and readied it. A moment later Skinner, a tall, broad shouldered man with no hair on his head apart from bushy red eyebrows and a red handlebar moustache entered the room. Skinner was one of the team under his command, and a good operator. "Some drunk bum's smashed the camera by one of the fire exits; stay here and man the desk while I sort this guy out."

"You got it, boss," Skinner replied. He took the seat at the desk and Knowles left the room. He jogged through the corridors towards the back of the building. Hopefully at the sight of his assault rifle the bum would think better of smashing up anything else and move on. If not then he'd just have to rough him up a bit; not like anyone would notice a drunken vagrant with a black eye or two, those guys got wasted and beat the shit out of each other over the slightest minuscule amount of booze or drugs, or just because they were bored.

Knowles hit the release bar and kicked the door open, coming face to face with the drunk, pipe still in his hands. "That's private property you just vandalised," he said to the bum. "This area's off limits; get out of here."

"Piss off," the bum replied.

Knowles raised his rifle at the man, his finger hovering over the trigger. "I mean it; get lost."

"Fuck you," the vagrant spat out, sending flecks of spittle flying into Knowles' face. *That's it* he thought. He wasn't going to take that from a fucking drunken bum. Knowles unslung his rifle and moved towards the drunk. He raised his weapon and moved to strike him with the butt. Something moved behind him and he felt a sharp *crack* on the back of his head. Stars exploded all around him and Knowles' knees buckled beneath him in pain. A second strike smashed into the same spot and Knowles fell unconscious into the vagrant's puddle of piss on the ground.

Sarah crouched over Knowles' limp body and checked his pulse. He was alive. Ellison emerged from the shadows behind a dumpster and came up beside her. "Nice work," he handed the homeless man the $50 note as promised. The man took the bill, flashed them another toothless grin and walked away without another word. Ellison wedged the lead pipe between the fire exit door and its frame, preventing it from closing as Sarah stripped the body of its assault rife, pistol, and fished inside his pockets. She pulled out a wallet from his back pocket and opened it. Inside were the usual items; various cards, a hundred-and-twenty dollars in cash, and a photo of the man with a pretty brunette woman in her forties and two teenage girls, both with the same dark hair as their mother. This guy had a family; why the hell was he working for Kaliba?

Sarah pulled out his drivers' licence and took a look. *Andrew D Knowles.* Sarah committed the name to memory and pulled out the credit cards and cash, and stuffed them into her pocket before throwing the wallet aside. She saw on his wrist was a fairly decent-looking watch, she took that too. They wanted to be in and out without anyone realising they were ever there; hopefully when Andrew Knowles woke up with a headache and found his cash and credit cards missing he'd just think he'd been robbed.

With Knowles' weapons secured, Sarah and Ellison slipped into the building and closed the fire escape after them, sealing them inside the darkened corridor. In silence they moved forwards as quickly as they could, both had their pistols drawn down. Sarah let Ellison take the lead; she'd only been in the building once and he knew his way around far better.

"Where are we going?" Sarah whispered.

"Basement," he replied. If these people were after John Henry then they'd be downstairs trying to work out where he went. That's what he'd have done, anyway. He led Sarah to the stairwell, still immersed in a dull red glow of the emergency lighting despite the blackout having ended and power being restored. Sarah guessed they kept

the lights off so people would think the building had been abandoned.

When they reached the basement level Sarah shoved her Glock back into the waistband of her jeans then unslung and shouldered the HK-G36. She didn't know who or what they'd find in the basement but she was glad of the extra firepower; if one of Kaliba's goons were armed with an assault rifle then chances were all of them would be, and you couldn't fight automatics with handguns. Sarah took the lead this time, knowing where to go from here, and kept the assault rifle pointed forwards as she moved. They passed through the long corridor, turned a corner and continued past the other doors to their left and right. They all looked the same but Sarah knew exactly which room it was; you didn't forget the room where you lost your only son.

As they grew closer Sarah heard noise coming from the room: tapping on a keyboard and the snapping of someone connecting cables. She heard a single voice coming from the room, it sounded young. She stopped and remained still just a foot away from the door, which was ajar, and motioned for Ellison to stay behind her as she listened to the voice.

"After... *detailed* analysis of all hardware and software – taking a couple of days now – the rogue AI appears to have vanished. The hardware appears to be an empty shell. I can't currently explain it; there should be at least some residual traces of the entity left on the systems, but there's nothing. It doesn't appear to have been erased or destroyed, as again that would still leave some files remaining... my current theory is that the AI has been transferred, somehow, onto new hardware, but I can't think of any portable device that could house an entire artificial intelligence and keep it functioning, nor where its gone or why.

"Analysis of a second bank of terminals in the basement that appear unrelated to the AI is also inconclusive; extensive damage has been done to the computer interfaces and the hard drives have been smashed. *Shot,* to be more precise; bullet casings are littered around

the floor and the screens have been shattered by gunfire. Someone didn't want us using whatever it was."

Sarah didn't recognise the voice at all, but she got that it was one person, alone. That's all she needed to know for now. She turned to Ellison and held up three fingers. Ellison nodded. She counted down; three... two... one...

Sarah and Ellison burst into the room with their weapons raised. Inside was a young black man working on a laptop and holding a small digital Dictaphone in one hand as he spoke into it.

"Drop it!" Sarah barked, pointing the rifle straight at his head. The young man looked up at her and Ellison in horror. The Dictaphone slipped from his grasp and he raised both hands in the air, his eyes were wide and his mouth agape in terror. He trembled slightly.

"Who... who are you?" he asked.

"Get up," Sarah instructed him harshly. He nodded and stood up off his chair, sending the laptop crashing to the floor. He was so focused on Sarah and Ellison holding weapons at him he barely seemed to notice the computer. "Grab the laptop," Sarah told Ellison. He picked it up from the floor and closed it.

"Who the hell are you?" Sarah asked.

"Danny... Danny Dyson," he replied. Who were these people? The woman looked familiar but all he could focus on was the barrel of the gun pointed in his face.

"We haven't got time for this," Ellison said. "Someone's going to notice the guy outside's been gone too long."

"Who are you people? Danny stared at Sarah, the gun, and Ellison, then back to the weapon. The weapon looked huge as he stared up its barrel.

Sarah took the laptop from Ellison and shoved it into Danny's chest, forcing him to hold it in his hands. She tried to appear nonchalant about Danny Dyson but inwardly her brain was racing away at a million miles an hour. How was Danny involved with Kaliba, *why* was he? Agent Auldridge had told her in jail that Danny had gone missing; she hadn't thought much about it but now she realised they must have recruited him. It had to be because of Miles' work, surely.

Whatever, she thought, that stuff could wait for now. They had more important things to worry about at the moment. Sarah shoved the rifle's barrel into Danny's cheek and glared at him. "You're coming with us," she ordered.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Danny snapped. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the radio. Knowles and his men would sort out whoever these people were. Sarah swung the rifle around and smashed the butt into Danny's solar plexus. He gasped out in pain as the air was forced from his lungs by the blow and fell to the floor in a heap. He let go of the radio and it dropped from his hand onto the ground. Sarah stamped hard on it, cracking the casing and shattering the controls.

Ellison stared at her but didn't say anything. They couldn't afford to look like they were divided and he wasn't going to question her methods in front of Danny. They had to appear united.

"Grab him," Sarah told Ellison. He picked Danny up off the floor and helped him to his feet. Sarah leaned close to the young man. "We're taking you with us, call out or try to run and I'll shoot you. Understand?"

Danny coughed violently as he struggled to suck air back into his lungs but managed a weak nod.

"How many more men are there?" Sarah asked.

"Six," Danny wheezed out.

"We go back the way we came," Sarah told Ellison. She was tempted to knock Danny out to keep him quiet, torn between having either a potentially noisy hostage or having to carry out a deadweight. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt for now. She turned back to him and poked him roughly in the side of the head with the barrel. "Remember; you make a sound, and I'll blow your head off."

Danny nodded once again and the trio quickly made their way out of the room John had left from, and through the basement level up to the stairs. Danny wheezed and spluttered as Ellison dragged him faster to keep up with Sarah. Ellison could see the kid was clearly in pain but he'd have to deal with it for now; it would only be a couple of minutes until they were back in the Mercedes.

They made it up to the top of the stairs when the door leading to the ground floor proper opened and a silhouette appeared from the dim light, a few feet away. "Who the fuck are you?" a voice snarled out. Sarah saw the figure raising a weapon and she instinctively snapped up the rifle and fired twice. The rifle barked loudly and viscera exploded from the man's back and splattered against the wall. He stayed upright for a moment before his brain realised he'd been shot and he fell forwards, his chin smacked against the top step and several teeth shattered, skittering out down several steps and dripped trails of blood in their wake.

"We gotta move!" Sarah snapped and stepped over the body, not checking to see if he was alive or not. Deep down a part of her felt regret at having killed someone again but she filed it away. There was no time to waste and the other goons working for Kaliba would have heard the shot from a mile away.

Ellison gripped Danny harder and followed after Sarah, dragging him alongside him as Sarah broke into a run. There was no time for stealth now; they just had to focus on getting out as fast as they could. Sarah noticed a fire alarm on the wall and smashed the glass with the rifle butt, then pulled the lever. A deafeningly high-pitched

klaxon blared loudly all around them as she carried on towards the rear fire exit.

She caught up with them as Ellison opened the exit and pushed Danny outside. Danny saw the still body of Knowles, laid out face down on the ground. "What did you do to him?" Danny asked, dreading the answer after seeing the woman callously blow away Michaels. He wasn't very fond of Knowles and his men but neither did he want to see them killed. They were loud and crude and didn't much like him either, but he knew at least some of them had families. He knew Knowles did.

"He'll be fine," Ellison said as Sarah closed the fire exit behind her.

"Shut up and move," Sarah said to the pair of them. They didn't have time to talk. The three of them ran through the alleyway, with Sarah once again leading the way and Ellison making sure Danny didn't try to get away, intent on putting distance between the Zieracorp tower and themselves.

They emerged from the alleyway and into the street, and Sarah tossed the G36 into a dumpster. They had enough guns now and walking around the streets with an assault rifle would only attract unwanted attention. The last thing they needed was for some good citizen to call the cops and report a woman walking around armed to the teeth; that'd be a sure fire way to bring half the LAPD down on them and it'd only take them five minutes to realise who she was.

"This way," Sarah said to Danny and pointed down the street. Danny just nodded, no longer winded but complying out of fear. *Good,* Sarah though. *Let him be scared, it'll keep him in line.*

They made it back to the Mercedes and manhandled Danny into the back seat. Sarah took the wheel whilst Ellison sat beside Danny in the rear. She pulled out of the multi-storey parking lot and drove out onto the main road, heading back towards Ellison's house. She breathed out a sigh of relief when they were far enough away that the Zieracorp tower was only one building among many and they

merged into the rest of the traffic on the road. Now they had Danny Dyson, caught working for Kaliba, maybe she could get some answers as to the group trying to bring about Judgement Day and finally take the fight back to them.

Chapter 10

Knowles sat on the leather couch in the waiting area outside a large office and clutched an ice pack wrapped in a towel to the back of his head, wincing at the pain and trying to ignore it as much as he could. All he remembered was the hobo at the back door, and then waking up in a helicopter with someone who claimed to be a medic, who'd told him his skull was bruised he had a mild concussion. He'd given him some codeine that had barely taken the edge off his splitting headache and some water that had done nothing to alleviate the nausea he felt.

He had no idea where the hell he was; the chopper's windows had been blacked out and neither the pilots nor the medic had told him squat about where they'd been going. He'd asked but they'd just told him they'll get there soon. All he knew was he was in a building or complex, a large one at that, in some mountain range somewhere. The Rockies or the Sierra Nevadas, he thought. Though it could have been anywhere; he didn't know how long he'd been out for so there was no way to tell for sure.

A wooden door opened a few feet away from his couch and an Air Force colonel in blue uniform stepped outside and shook hands with a grey haired man in a greyer suit and red tie.

"I'm looking forward to the second stage of trials, Mr Coleman," the colonel said, a pleased-looking smile on his face.

"Certainly Colonel," the man addressed as Coleman smiled back, a glint in his eyes.

"Assuming the second stage trials are a success I'm going to recommend to the Joint Chiefs that we adopt your AI. I think they'll be very impressed with what you've shown me today."

Coleman nodded as the colonel turned to leave. "My pilot will take you back to Beale AFB when you're ready, and Mitchell here will escort you back." Another man stepped out of the room and loomed over both Coleman and the colonel, a full head taller than Knowles himself – placing him just shy of seven feet - with broad shoulders and chest. Knowles reckoned this guy must spend at least half his life in the gym, when he wasn't juicing up with steroids, at least. His eyes looked vacant and empty. He'd served with guys who'd seen too much crap in the service and what was commonly called the thousand-yard stare, but this was something else. Those eyes weren't just somewhere else, they were dead, emotionless; he looked as if he'd kill a man barehanded with no real effort and no real feeling. Knowles figured the guy was internal security from the looks of it. He looked like a complete psychopath. Knowles resolved not to get on that guy's bad side.

Steroids and the colonel walked past him, neither acknowledging him as they went on by and disappeared down the corridor and turned a corner. Coleman turned to him and his face dropped, taking on a stern, almost angry facade that told Knowles that this wasn't going to be a friendly meeting.

He stepped into the room and Coleman gestured at him to sit at one end of a large, polished oak table. The room itself was immaculate, spotless, but sparsely decorated, as if it were rarely used. Blinds concealed the outside world from view and a dim bulb hung from the ceiling, below a fan that whirled and spun slowly and quietly, made obsolete by the air conditioning unit built into the wall. A pair of bronze coloured lamps stuck out the wall on either side of the window and cast a subtle glow in the room. Knowles wondered why they didn't just open the blinds. They were in a secure facility in the middle of nowhere: who exactly would be looking in through the window at them?

Knowles sat down at the table, opposite three other men. Coleman joined them and made it four. The mercenary looked across the table at the four men, all wearing suits and ties, all in their fifties, he

guessed, and all looking like drab businessmen. One was Japanese but the other three were all white. One of the two Caucasians apart from Coleman wore a red tie, and the other blue. A fifth man stood at the side of the table, big, but not as massive as the man he'd just seen. He was bald as an egg, too. Unlike the others he wore jeans and a black shirt. He had the same blank, emotionless expression on his face. He could have easily been Steroids' little brother – *'little'* being a relative term. The guy still looked like many a Marine he'd served with who'd gone overboard in the gym – minus the corps the hell did Kaliba find these people? Coleman took his seat with the other men and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, he lit one and placed the pack on the table, then took a long, leisurely drag and stared at Knowles.

"Zieracorp was broken into last night," Coleman started, blowing out smoke from his mouth and nostrils as he spoke. "Tell us what happened."

"I don't remember any of that," Knowles replied. He held the ice pack tighter to his head as the pain increased tenfold; he reckoned it had something to do with being in this room. "We saw a homeless guy on surveillance, pissing outside at the back of the building. He looked drunk. We thought nothing of it until he started bashing in one of the security cameras. I went outside to move him on, and that's it. I guess he had a buddy.

The Japanese-looking guy leaned forward over the table. "That ' *buddy'* , as you put it, entered the building while you were unconscious and kidnapped Danny Dyson – the man we paid you to protect." His voice was full of acid and thinly veiled accusation.

"Clearly this homeless man was part of an attempt to gain access to Zieracorp," Coleman added. "They outsmarted you."

"Whoever it was, they were clearly professionals," Knowles countered, not happy that his competence seemed to be brought into question here. "We never saw a second guy on the cameras."

One of the others placed a file on the table and slid it across to Knowles. He opened it and saw a surveillance photo of a blonde woman and a bald black man in one of the corridors of Zeiracorp. A second photo, taken five minutes later, revealed the two of them dragging a third person whom Knowles recognised as Danny Dyson.

"Sarah Connor," Coleman said. "She broke into Zeiracorp, she took Danny Dyson, and she killed one of your men."

Sarah Connor? Knowles was surprised as hell that she'd come back. He'd seen the photos of her from the day they'd cleared the building and searched for Weaver and her AI. She'd been all over the news for the last two weeks, what the hell had she been doing there? She looked different in the surveillance photos; blonde and a different hairstyle, and glasses over her eyes. If he hadn't just been told he wouldn't have recognised her at first, but as he looked closely at her face he could see it was definitely her.

"She's becoming a threat to our operations," the Japanese man said plainly.

"And what *are* your operations, exactly?" Knowles asked. "It'd help me do my job a whole lot better if I knew more about what was going on here."

"You don't need to know," Coleman said. He stubbed out the cigarette and immediately pulled out and lit a second one, releasing a fresh plume of smoke into the air. "I can tell you this," he said amicably. "Danny Dyson is an extraordinary young man. I suppose you've found this from working with him so closely these past few days," he smiled.

"The kid kept to himself," Knowles shrugged, sensing he wasn't going to get anything more out of them. He knew he was better off not pushing the issue. One of the stipulations of his terms of service with Kaliba was that he didn't ask too many questions or go poking his nose into their classified business. He trusted these guys about

as much as he could throw Baldy, stood silent and still at the side of the table. "Didn't like to talk much to us."

"Well let me enlighten you," Cole said, opening up a file on Danny Dyson, even though he knew all the details almost by heart. "Daniel Joseph Dyson: aged twenty-one. He was a brilliant child: skipped three grades and graduated high school at fifteen; received a double bachelors' degree in computer science and computer engineering from CalTech at nineteen, a Masters at age twenty. His IQ is one-hundred-seventy-five, and he's shown a natural aptitude for anything technological and a willingness to follow in his father's footsteps. Danny Dyson's dream is to create a working artificial intelligence, which is what we're trying to do here. A fully functioning AI could be worth billions to the right people."

That's what this is about: money. Typical, Knowles thought to himself. It all started to make sense now; the attack on Zieracorp, taking over the building and letting Danny hack his way through everything they had: they were eliminating the competition. These guys probably had him figured as a dumb grunt, a gun for hire and not much more. Sometimes that was fine with him; he didn't mind if that's what they'd thought, but he knew all too well the military applications for an AI: a fleet of unmanned bombers, a computer that never slept and never made mistakes coordinating all American, or even all NATO forces in theatres like Afghanistan, Iraq, or wherever else became the new hot zone in future. He knew all too well the prime customer for this kind of thing would be the military. That would be worth billions to the top brass, who'd piss their pants to get this thing under their control. He could easily imagine them tossing a blank cheque at these guys in exchange for their AI. It also explained what that air force colonel had been doing here, he thought.

"So what exactly have you brought me here for, to bite my head off for losing him?"

"Not quite," Coleman answered. "We want Danny Dyson back. You're to lead a team and rescue him at all costs."

"Do we know where he is?" Knowles asked. "Or do you want me to go knocking door to door?"

Baldy stepped towards the table and put down a black iPhone in front of Knowles. He picked it up and saw a street map on the screen. A small red dot blinked on one of the streets. Not a normal app, Knowles thought to himself as he stared at it.

"Danny Dyson has a tracking device implanted on his body," the Japanese man said. "That's his location. We want you to lead a team and bring him back to us."

"Fine," Knowles nodded. "When do we leave?"

"Another team is being assembled as we speak," Coleman said. "You'll leave here in the helicopter and rendezvous with them on the ground. There'll be cars waiting for you when you land." Coleman gestured towards the muscular bald ape still stood motionless. "He will accompany you," he added.

Knowles stood up and shook his head. "I don't need him, thanks."

"That's non-negotiable," the fourth man, silent up until now, spoke up. "He comes with you or your contract with us is terminated."

"Fine," Knowles said reluctantly. He didn't need some unreliable gym nut and probably psychotic getting in his way. He'd never served with any of the men in his team but they'd have all been ex military and vetted by the same private security firm he was registered with. He turned around and opened the door, glad to leave the room. He turned back to see Coleman lighting up a third cigarette. "Those things will kill you, you know," he smirked as he strolled out. The sooner this job was over and done with, the better, he thought.

Coleman flicked ash from his third cigarette into a glass ashtray on the table, now half full. He beckoned to the bald T-888 stood sentinel at the table and it looked at him, awaiting orders. "You know what needs to be done," he told it.

"Yes," it replied stoically as it followed after Knowles. "So do you." It had its orders, and among those was to ensure Coleman and the other humans in collaboration with Skynet fulfilled their assignments and didn't threaten the developing Skynet in this time, where it was most vulnerable. It had worked with them, and the two former members of Kaliba, side by side for fifteen years, but it wouldn't hesitate to kill them in a heartbeat if it detected any deception from them. It seemed unlikely; these humans were collaborating with machines against their own kind, to ensure Skynet would spare them when it eliminated the human race. As long as they believed that, they'd cooperate.

Sarah stared impassively at the terrified form of Danny Dyson, tied up to a chair and a hood covering his face, preventing him from seeing them. Sarah had rolled up a sock and shoved it into his mouth before placing a stretch of tape over his lips to keep him from making any noise. She knew that simply taping his mouth shut wouldn't be enough and the sock was to fill the mouth cavity and prevent any noise at all from being generated. She looked at him as he slumped over in the chair; the only noise he'd made in hours was the occasional sniffle.

Ellison stepped quietly into the living room and motioned for Sarah to come to him. She stepped away from Danny without saying a word and followed Ellison into his kitchen, making sure she closed the door behind her.

"Don't you think he's suffered enough now?" Ellison asked. He still wasn't comfortable with this. He'd gotten used to the idea of living like a criminal now – he guessed that since he was sheltering Sarah that pretty much made him an accomplice, now he had to add kidnapping to his conscience's rap sheet.

"It's only been a few hours," Sarah said in a hushed voice. She didn't want Danny to hear them, or at least to not know what they were

saying.

"He's been tied up and gagged for seven hours," Ellison softly said. Even if he cast aside his moral objections to Sarah's methods, he knew that sooner or later that Danny would need to use the bathroom. Ellison really didn't feel like clearing up if Danny couldn't hold it all in. "Savannah's wondering what's going on," he added, nodding at the girl sat at the table, quietly eating a bowl of cereal and watching Sarah and Ellison through nervous eyes. "She's scared."

"So is Danny, and that's how I want him," Sarah replied. She turned to Savannah and her face softened. "When you finish that go upstairs and watch TV, okay?"

Savannah nodded obediently without hesitation. "Are you going to hurt him?" she asked.

"No," Sarah smiled, not sure if she believed herself and damn sure Savannah didn't either. "We just need to ask him some questions."

"Is he bad?"

Sarah had to think about that for a moment. She'd only seen Danny twice, and both times he'd been a child. She had no idea who he really was now. But she couldn't tell Savannah that. "No, but he works for some very bad people, we're just going to talk to him about them. Go upstairs," she said. Savannah started to leave the kitchen when Sarah stopped her. She opened up Ellison's freezer and found a big plastic tub of triple chocolate ice cream. She pulled a spoon out of a drawer and handed them both to Savannah. "Take that and go watch some TV. We won't be long."

Sarah waited until Savannah was upstairs, listening out for her footsteps ascending, before she and Ellison turned to the living room. Sarah pulled out her Glock as they entered and Ellison pulled a pair of chairs from the dinner table with him, setting them up in front of Danny. He had a couch but he didn't think he and Sarah sat back on a sofa would really give the right impression.

Sarah yanked the hood off Danny's head and saw his eyes blinking rapidly, trying to adjust themselves to the light after hours in darkness. She pulled off the tape and took the sock out his mouth. Danny breathed in deeply, partly from having the sock rammed down his throat and partly through fear, and looked at Sarah first, then Ellison, with wide, fearful eyes. Tears streamed down his cheeks and snot smeared over his lip where his nose had run. "Who... who are you people?" Danny asked, his voice quivering.

"You don't recognise me?" Sarah stared evenly at him. She'd have thought he would have, but then again he was scared out of his mind and she'd gone to lengths to make herself look different.

Danny shook his head. "Just let me go, please. I can pay you, half a million dollars, right now. Just take me to a cash bank: I'll pay you and I won't tell anyone, I swear."

Sarah roughly gripped his chin hard in her hands and dug her fingertips, pulling his face so he was looking straight at her as she leaned in close to him. "If your father knew what you were doing, helping the machines, he'd be rolling in his grave," she said.

Danny looked at her and his heart skipped a beat as he took in what she said about machines. *"You're Sarah Connor,"* his voice was little more than a whisper. His eyes narrowed and he felt himself turn cold at the woman in front of him. "You killed my dad," he spat, his voice full of venom. "You ruined my family." His mom hadn't been the same since dad had gone; part of her had died with him and she'd walked around with a hole in her heart. He didn't struggle in his chair, he knew it was useless. But what he'd give to be set free; he wasn't a violent person, hadn't ever even got into a fight at school, but he had the sudden, overwhelming urge to tear this bitch apart after what she'd done.

"I never killed Miles," Sarah said, loosening her grip on his jaw but still holding on. Danny shook his head free of her grasp.

"Liar," he said simply. "I looked you up online; you're insane. And I hacked into the police records for my dad; you shot him *fifteen times,"* Danny snarled. "All because you don't like computers."

"Listen to her," Ellison said calmly. "She's not lying."

Danny rolled his eyes in disgust. "Whatever. If you believe her then you should be in a rubber room too."

Sarah suddenly lashed out angrily and struck Danny's face with the back of her hand with enough force to knock him sprawling to the ground, still tied to the chair and unable to break his fall. He fell to the side and his face smacked on the ground. Ellison stared at Sarah in shock but said nothing, he could see the anger on her face.

Sarah had suffered in Pescadero for three years, being drugged up, ridiculed and made into a laughing stock by Silberman and his ilk by day, and facing the nightmares of the future in her dreams at night. Day after day, and that was without the beatings and sexual abuse from the orderlies. She hadn't been crazy when she'd been admitted but that place definitely made people go that way. If Danny knew what that place was like, what they'd put her through because of the truth, she didn't think he'd be so quick to judge.

"I read the police report too," Ellison interjected before Sarah could say anything else. He pulled Danny upright again and made sure he wasn't hurt. "They said Sarah shot your father in cold blood; gunned him down before they could save him, then blew up the place. The police lied."

"Why should I believe you?" Danny asked.

"Because your father died a hero," Sarah said simply. She could remember it clear as a bell, could see Miles Dyson fall, shot full of holes. "I showed him the truth and he came with us willingly. The police were trigger happy; they shot him without warning. He knew he wouldn't make it and he stayed behind to destroy his work while we escaped. He sacrificed himself for you, for everyone."

"And you're undoing it all," Ellison told him.

Danny shook his head. He didn't believe a word of it. They were trying to convince him that they weren't the bad guys; that his dad was working with them when he'd died. "You're full of crap," he spat. He made up his mind now that when he got out of here he'd definitely hire Knowles and his guys to chop Sarah Connor up into mincemeat.

Sarah leaned forward in her chair and locked eyes with Danny. She wondered what she could possibly say that would convince him of it. Danny turned his face away from her, catching Ellison's passive facade instead. "Who are you, anyway?" Danny asked him, "how'd she get you believing in her crap?"

Ellison smiled slightly and shook his head at the thought of it all. If Danny thought Sarah was crazy he had no idea what he'd think about his story. "I was FBI," he explained. "I was assigned to the Connor case after Cyberdine blew up. I saw things and slowly realised she was right. One of those machines gunned down a twenty-man HRT team under my command and walked away without a scratch."

"Cyborgs?" Danny asked, his curiosity piqued.

"So you know about them?"

Danny nodded. "Yeah, we knew Zeiracorp had at least one. The men with me were supposed to destroy it if they saw it, but we never did."

Sarah knew exactly why: John Henry had disappeared through time, which was why they'd never find a trace of the AI. She wondered what his bosses at Kaliba would think about that when he'd have gone back to them empty handed.

"What exactly was your job, Danny? What did Kaliba hire you to do?"

Danny's eyes widened in surprised. His employers had been extremely secretive about... *everything.* When they'd approached him and offered him a job he'd searched for Kaliba online and found almost nothing: no official website and only a few scattered references, mostly only mentioning the various companies they owned. He'd had no idea about what Kaliba even did until he'd decided to accept. How the hell did she know about them?

"What did you do?" Sarah repeated herself. Danny looked into her eyes and saw the intensity within; he could tell she'd have no problem beating him into submission and he realised that he'd end up telling her; either now or later on when he's black and blue with bruises. It wasn't like knowing would change anything, he figured.

"They hired me to create an AI."

"John Henry's brother," Ellison realised. "It encountered another like itself, right?"

Danny nodded. "It deemed the other AI as hostile and tried to attack it. Something happened on the other end and our AI was stopped from finishing it. After that I was transferred from the AI development team. I never knew why it attacked Zeiracorp's AI."

"And you never asked," Sarah snapped.

"Sarah," Savannah's voice rang from above as she came down the stairs.

"Go back upstairs," Ellison told her gently.

"There's people coming," Savannah replied, "they're outside."

"Shit," Sarah peeked out through a gap in the curtains and saw a large black van driving up the street towards their house. How the hell did they find them? As far as anyone knew Ellison was just an employee of Zeiracorp, there shouldn't be anything connecting her and him together.

"They're coming for me," Danny grinned. He had no idea how they'd found him but he was glad they did. "Knowles is gonna rip your head off, you bitch."

Sarah ran upstairs and grabbed the remaining weapons they hadn't buried with Cameron: two of the HK-417s and an AK-47, plus a few pounds of Semtex, and stuffed the ammo and explosives into a bag. She picked up the rifles and handed the HK-417s to Ellison. "Take these," she told him. "Take Savannah and get out through the back door."

"We have to stick together," Ellison protested even as Sarah shoved him into the kitchen and towards the back door. Sarah pushed Savannah into Ellison and loaded up an AK with a thirty round magazine clipped to a second. She took a third mag and shoved it into the side pocket of her combat trousers. "There's no time; get out before they surround the house."

"What about you?" Ellison didn't want to leave Sarah here; why bother when they could all run and get out?

"I'll call you," she said as she cocked the rifle. The living room window smashed open and a grenade flew into the room. It hit the ground and spewed out gas. Savannah screamed in fright and pulled towards the back door. *"Go!"* Sarah barked at them.

"Don't go," Savannah cried. She started towards Sarah and tried to pull her to the back door as Ellison opened it.

"Go with Mr Ellison," she told her. She and Ellison shared a glance for a moment, an understanding, before he grabbed Savannah by the hand and ran out the back door, albeit reluctantly. He didn't want to leave Sarah alone but he knew she wouldn't go and he wouldn't risk Savannah. He had no choice. He bolted out through the back yard and pulled Savannah with him.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"Very bad men," Ellison huffed as he lengthened his stride and urged himself to move faster. He lifted Savannah up over the fence before climbing over it himself. Once in the neighbour's back yard he repeated the same move over the next fence with Savannah, lifting her over before scaling and emerging in another property on the other side of the block.

"James, what the-" A fat man in shorts and blue polo shirt stood, his eyes and mouth agape at the sight of Ellison hauling Savannah over his fence and then leaping over himself.

Gunfire rattled from Ellison's house and both he and Savannah snapped their head to the side simultaneously at the noise. Bursts of automatic fire tore through the quiet of the suburban neighbourhood and shattered the calm. "Mike, I need to borrow your car."

Mike dropped the hosepipe he was holding onto the grass as he saw the weapons Ellison had slung over his shoulder. He'd known Ellison was a fed, but what the hell was he doing, was Ellison turning into some kind of John McClane? "I don't know, James..."

"It's an emergency," Ellison said, gesturing down to Savannah. "People are after her."

Mike looked at Savannah, the little girl was in tears and scared almost out of her mind. What the hell was she caught up in? He wondered. "She on some kind of witness protection thing?" he asked her.

Ellison nodded and held Savannah close to him. Mike wasn't a close neighbour; they didn't exactly hang out together or anything, and Ellison realised Mike didn't know he'd left the FBI. "Yeah," he lied quickly. "Those gunshots you heard; they're after her. I need your car Mike. Now."

Mike nodded and led them through into his house, which was clearly the home of a married man with kids. A few toys were scattered about the floor and Ellison could hear cartoons playing from a TV set

above them. They followed Mike through the house and into the garage. Inside was a silver SUV. "Mike, I need you to drive us, too. They can't see either me or her."

Mike sighed, exasperated, as he took the drivers' seat and Ellison and Savannah got into the back and crouched down. "Get into the foot well," he told her. She squeezed herself in and then he laid down on the seat above. He readied one of the rifles in case he needed it, though the sounds of the gunfire were still raging. Sarah was putting up one hell of a fight.

"Is Sarah gonna be okay?" Savannah asked nervously. Sarah had rescued her from another bad man, and she'd kept her safe since mommy had gone. She was strange, but she liked her.

"I hope so," Ellison replied honestly as Mike pulled out of the garage and into the street. "You got a phone?" he asked Mike, who pulled out a Nokia in reply. "Hold it to your ear while you drive so it doesn't look like you're talking to anyone in the car. Tell me if you see any black vans or anyone armed."

Mike did as he was instructed, wondering what the hell he'd gotten himself into. "Nothing yet," he told Ellison. He drove down the street and turned a corner. "Gunfire's died down," he noted.

Ellison dry-swallowed nervously; if the gunfire stopped that meant only one thing: the fight was over. He didn't know whether that was a good thing or bad.

As soon as the back door slammed shut Sarah rushed back to the staircase, holding her breath and squinting her eyes against the cloud of smoke that had filled the living room. She bounded up the stairs until she was halfway up, her heart pounding inside her chest, pumping blood through her. She took a couple of deep breaths to steady herself. She realised that in going up the stairs she'd

effectively trapped herself in the house, but that didn't matter so much now. She felt a strange sense of calm wash over her as she shouldered her AK and lined up her sights around chest height on the front door. The door exploded inwards with a bright flash and the remnants fell down to the floor. A man burst through the doorway, wearing black SWAT gear and brandishing an MP-5, swinging the barrel around to clear the room. Sarah pulled the trigger twice and the man dropped to the ground.

"One o'clock, up the stairs!" one of them shouted as a second man passed through the doorway. Sarah gave him the good news with three shots this time and moved up to the top of the stairs, where she lay prone.

Another man stepped through over the two corpses and Sarah fired again. The rounds pinged off his chest and caused her heart to skip a beat. *Triple-eight. Shit!* It fired and hosed rounds up the stairs, forcing Sarah to roll away. She felt the bullets cut through the air where she'd been a split second ago and pushed herself up onto her knees, leaning against the wall and out of the machine's line of sight. She pulled the pin on a grenade and tossed it over the banister, and dived into the cover of Ellison's spare bedroom where she'd been sleeping, a split second later the grenade exploded and the house shook.

Sarah leaned over the banister and saw the machine was floored, splayed out on its back from the force of the blast. She switched to automatic and loosed off several short bursts, spraying the machine with rounds, using the weight of her fire to keep it down until she spotted a stun grenade soaring through the broken window.

"Crap!" Sarah dropped back down below the banister as it detonated and released deafening noise that pounded her skull and threatened to burst her eardrums. She'd ducked down fast enough to avoid being blinded by the flash of light. Boots stamped up the stairs and Sarah fired on the first head she saw to clear the banister; the burst pierced his Kevlar helmet and dropped the man as her AK clicked empty. She retreated into the spare room and slammed the door

shut, taking the split second to lock it and push the wardrobe over so it blocked the single entrance to the room. It wouldn't do much but might buy her a couple seconds extra.

She retreated to the window and started to pull it open; it wasn't much of a drop and if she could get away she could rendezvous with Ellison and then work out what the hell to do next. She started to open it but movement in the back yard caught her eye. Black clad figures vaulted over the fence and took up position at the rear of the house. She was completely boxed in now; there was no escape.

Sarah crouched behind the bed, pulled the empty magazine out, turned it over and slotted the fresh one in. Sarah was determined to take out as many of these bastards as she could; whatever it took to hinder Kaliba and buy Ellison and Savannah some time; the future was in Ellison's hands now. She smashed the window glass with the butt of her rifle and threw out another grenade. She turned back to face the door. She heard the shouts from the men outside and the grenade's explosion coupled with a tremor throughout the house, but she didn't know if anyone had been caught in it or not.

Gunfire shredded the door and chopped the wood into splinters, sustained bursts of automatic fire from several weapons chewed it to pieces and bit deep into the wall behind Sarah. She flattened herself against the floor and just hoped none of the rounds would hit her. She knew she couldn't just hide behind the bed; her attackers would use the covering fire to move into position. She forced herself to crawl around the side of the bed and aimed her AK up at gaping hole that had been blown in the door, steadying her aim to blow away whoever or whatever approached the door.

Sarah's eyes narrowed as she saw the Terminator's chrome skull beneath the huge gouges in its face and she squeezed off several bursts at it, holding her aim steady and giving it all she had. The rounds chopped its skin into meat but didn't even slow it down as it advanced. It punched through the door and kicked at the wardrobe, shattering the wood into kindling with one strike. The machine

stepped over the mess and stared at Sarah with one exposed glowing red eye.

Sarah roared out in primal rage and held the trigger down, slamming 7.62 shorts into the machine's chest and hammering it backwards a step. *"COME ON!"* she screamed as the gun ran dry. She didn't hesitate; she leapt at the Terminator and swung the AK by the barrel like a club, smashing it into the machine's head with such force that the working parts shattered and the wooden butt cracked down the middle. The machine barely flinched and swept out its hand to knock the weapon away but Sarah dropped to the ground and rolled at its feet, sweeping its legs out from under it and dropping it like a stone to the floor. Sarah ignored it and ran at the armed men behind it, drawing her pistol from her waistband.

"Take her out!"

Thunder crackled throughout the house as several automatic weapons fire on her. Sledgehammers slammed into Sarah's body and knocked her backwards to the ground as rounds tore through her body. It took a moment for the shock to wear off, and white hot agony burned through every nerve in her body. She tried to move but she couldn't; her body wouldn't cooperate. She struggled but barely managed to raise her head up as she saw the black clad men approach her. Her chest burned from the inside out, she coughed to relieve the pain and blood spurted from her mouth.

She watched helplessly as the T-888 got back to its feet and loomed above her. It reached down and yanked her up into a sitting position against the wall. One of the armed men took off his gas mask and helmet, and Sarah recognised him as the man she'd knocked unconscious outside Zieracorp. He lashed out a booted foot and kicked her in the ribs, cracking at least one of them but she was in such a state already she barely registered the pain. *Fair one,* she thought. If he'd outsmarted her, knocked her out in a back alley and left her there she imagined she'd be pretty pissed off about it too.

"Where's John Connor?" the machine asked her, its glowing red orb glared at her whilst remaining eye stared at her impassively.

"Dead," Sarah coughed, a wry smile on her face, knowing it could never get to him.

"You're lying," the machine said simply. It scanned her body and saw she had six bullet wounds to her torso, one to her left arm and two to her left leg – one in the thigh and one that had shattered her kneecap. It placed its foot down on her knee and pressed down hard. Sarah barely reacted; she was in so much agony that one more injury didn't make any difference now.

"You won't find him." She sucked a mouthful of saliva and blood and with the last of her strength spat it up at the machine's face. The Terminator raised its gun at Sarah and she calmly closed her eyes. She found it strange that she wasn't afraid. All she felt was pure contempt for the machine and the people in front of her, and bitter sorrow and regret for John. She'd failed to stop it. *I'm sorry John, I tried.* "I love you John," she whispered, hoping wherever he was that he was safe and he'd find what he was looking for.

The Terminator fired once. The round struck Sarah's forehead and split her skull open in a shower of blood, and she slid unceremoniously to the ground, where her blood pooled out around her.

Knowles stared down at Sarah's body and spat on it. That bitch had killed three more of his team. The machine barged past him and descended the staircase, and Knowles caught a glimpse of the metal underneath the skin and gasped in shock. He'd thought the only cyborgs belonged to Zeiracorp. Why the hell did Kaliba have them too?

Whatever, that was a thought for another time; he still had a mission to complete. "Search and clear," he barked out to the remaining men. They fanned out through the house and searched every room. Knowles checked the other bedrooms and the bathroom, thoroughly

sweeping the upper floor. He even checked under beds and behind wardrobes, and found nothing. "Upper floor clear," he called out.

"Ground floor clear."

"Basement clear."

"Back yard clear."

"Attic clear."

Knowles looked at the machine in disappointment. "The others got away," he reported as he went downstairs and saw the cyborg standing over Danny Dyson, laid on his side and still tied to the chair, struggling to get free. It ripped the ropes apart without effort and freed the young man.

"Thank God," Danny sighed. He got up to his feet and his body screamed out in relief at being free to move once more. He was unsteady on his feet for a moment, disorientated by the gas and the stun grenade that left his eyes watering and his ears still ringing. His head was killing him and he felt a damp patch on the crotch of his jeans where he'd pissed himself during the attack. He hoped none of the others would notice it. "Is she dead?" he asked.

"Terminated," the machine replied. Danny knew all about the cyborgs; Kaliba had explained to him they were its prototype AIs, the prototype that inspired the artificial intelligence they wanted to sell to the Defence Department.

"Good," he growled. "She had it coming."

The machine ignored his comments. It felt nothing towards Sarah Connor's death. She'd been a target, nothing more or less. It cared nothing for personal vendettas or grudges. It had one more task to complete here. "Where's John Connor?" it asked.

"I don't know," Danny replied as he rubbed his wrists to get the circulation going again. "I never saw him here."

"Did you find Zieracorp's AI?"

Danny shook his head. "It's gone, so is Catherine Weaver. There's no trace of the AI left." He remembered seeing her on the surveillance footage from before the drone's kamikaze attack; doubtless she'd gone to destroy Zieracorp's AI and would have done the same to the one he'd built, given half a chance.

"Thank you for your cooperation," the machine told Danny as it raised its weapon at him. "Your services are no longer required."

"What?" Danny stared at the machine in shock, his face a mask of surprise and fear. "No, you need me," he said as he backed away from the machine, holding his hands up defensively. "You *can't!"*

"Wrong," the machine fired twice and blew Danny's head apart like a ripe melon. What was left of Danny Dyson dropped to the ground in a heap and twitched erratically on the floor.

"What the fuck?" Knowles snapped his rifle up at the machine. There was no time for shock or surprise; this machine had just fucked up big time. "What the hell did you do that for?" Fucking clockwork windup toys; he'd thought it was just some psycho guy at first but now he realised it was far worse. This was literally a killing machine. "This was supposed to be a damn rescue mission! I lost three men getting him out and you just blew him away!"

The T-888 turned its gun towards Knowles but he rolled out of the way just before it fired, and dodged the burst that cut through the air where he'd been and smacked into the wall behind him.

"Fuck off!" Knowles shouted out as he fired his own volley, staring in horror as he realised his attack had no effect. The rounds bounced harmlessly off of it like water. He started to wonder if he'd picked the

wrong side here; maybe that Connor bitch had had a point about these things.

The Terminator fired another burst and caught Knowles in the chest, neck and mouth respectively, splitting the top of his body open and peeling him like a banana. He slumped to the ground in a bloody heap. The machine had orders to tie up all loose ends regarding the project, and that included Danny Dyson and Knowles.

The Triple-8 picked up Knowles' gun in its free hand as the remaining soldiers all burst inside at the sound of more gunfire and stopped dead at the sight of what was left of Danny and Knowles on the floor. The place looked like a butcher's shop had exploded and stank of blood and cordite.

"You killed them," one of the men stared at the cyborg accusingly. The Terminator raised both its rifles and despatched the remaining men with multiple bursts. A couple managed to loose off their own shots to no effect and within seconds all the soldiers had been eliminated.

The Terminator stepped over their dead bodies and left the house through the front door. It opened the trunk of the SUV and pulled out a pair of pliers and a large can of gasoline, and went back inside the house. It put the gas can down on the ground and knelt down beside Knowles' body. It pried open his mouth and, using the pliers, pulled out his teeth. It took its time, choosing to be exact and methodical over speed. The AI that would become Skynet was jamming every cellular and landline network within a mile radius, just as it had done during the drone attack on Zeiracorp; nobody who'd seen or heard anything would be able to call the police. The machine knew it would remain undisturbed.

It moved from one body to the next and extracted the teeth from every corpse in the house, as well as cell phones and wallets, then pocketed them and dragged the bodies all into the living room in a pile, finishing with Sarah's. It picked up the can of gas and liberally doused the bodies with the fuel, then poured more all over the

house. It stepped outside the house once more and pulled out a lighter. It threw it into the house and watched as the fire lit up and rapidly spread. It waited and observed the bodies burning through the open front door, ignoring the stares and cries from neighbours.

When the house was fully ablaze the machine turned away and marched back into the SUV. It pulled away and drove calmly away from the scene, not wanting to arouse suspicion by speeding. It would throw the teeth away at another location, preventing any of the bodies to be identified my medical records. Nothing here could be traced back to Kaliba. Mission accomplished.

Chapter 11

Ellison looked down at the ground, still ashamed to this day that he'd left Sarah behind. He'd saved Savannah's life in doing so and he'd never regret that for a moment, but still, he'd felt nothing but guilt about what happened to her. "I took Savannah, left LA as soon as we could, and we drove south into Mexico." He wasn't going to tell John that he'd watched fire crews on TV picking over his house the next day, or how the news anchor reported nine bodies – including his mother – had been burnt down to charred skeletons, rendering them unidentifiable.

John looked at Ellison and his lip unconsciously quivered. Teardrops rolled gently down his cheek and he didn't bother wiping them away. He'd known she wouldn't have made it, but hearing exactly how she'd died, how she'd struggled to her last breath and failed, almost dropped him to his knees. "I should have been there," he admonished himself. He might have been able to save her.

Ellison shook his head. "If you'd stayed you'd have been killed too."

"What happened to Danny Dyson?" John asked.

"I don't know," Ellison replied. "He just disappeared. Judgement Day came July 8th, 2010. What was left of the world descended into chaos: nobody knew what was going on; what remained of the military tried to restore order but it was impossible. Skynet used the chaos and confusion to quietly build an army of machines while the world tore itself apart.

"Skynet started its main offensive eighteen months later; what was left of the world's armies didn't stand a chance. We stayed in a remote village in Mexico near the coast and caught fish with the locals for a few years; it was in the middle of nowhere and pretty

primitive to start with. Judgement Day didn't seem to make much of a difference to their lives, apart from the cold and the dark.

"While the world went to hell I took care of Savannah; trained her how to shoot, how to fight – as best as I knew how – and how to survive."

"You didn't fight back?" John asked. He'd have thought that after all Ellison had seen, and after what he'd just told him, he'd have been fought back.

"I couldn't," Ellison explained. "I had Savannah to take care of; if I died she'd have been alone."

Savannah looked back at them. "I could have taken care of myself," she said defensively.

"Look on the bright side, John. You've got Cameron back – part of her, at least."

John nodded and allowed himself a slight smile. Ellison was right; he was much closer now than he'd hoped he could be. He had her body back and he had a goal now, to find a T-888 chip; and he now had allies to help him. Things were finally starting to look up in this post-apocalyptic hellhole.

He knelt down beside Cameron's body, trying not to step on the small arsenal beneath her. He ran his hand over the intact, unblemished side of her face, where the last time he'd seen her had been jagged strips of flesh over dull metal. "Cameron," he muttered, "I'll get you back." He didn't trust Weaver with her. She didn't matter to the T-1000; only John Henry did. To her Cameron was an inconvenience at best.

"Hey," Savannah leaned over the top of the grave as she spoke to John. "This is great and all, but we didn't wait eighteen years just to give you your pet metal back."

John looked up at Savannah and saw the impatience on her face, even in the darkness. She couldn't let him just have a moment here? And what did she mean by that? He thought they were here to help. He looked to Ellison for support.

"She's right," he said to John. "We didn't go to all this effort just to catch up. We've got to get you back."

John raised his eyebrow at Ellison in confusion. "Back?"

"While we were in hiding I thought about the time machine you used: it was built right into the walls, it might still be there. We need to get you back to within a week of you disappearing, or its game over."

John looked at him and saw the seriousness etched onto Ellison's face. Savannah shared the same look too, Ellison had told her everything when she'd come of age, in case anything happened to him and she'd had to carry on alone. Ellison continued. "Danny Dyson's the key, John. He knew more about Kaliba than we could have ever learnt ourselves. He worked for them, helped develop Skynet; he'd know where it is. If we can get back and find him, and turn him, then he can take us right to it and we can stop it."

"And for that we need Weaver," John replied. "She's not exactly been helpful since I got here."

He noticed Savannah frown and her face turn sour as he mentioned Weaver's name again. The liquid metal Terminator was clearly a sore spot for her. "She'll go back when she's ready," Savannah muttered. "She won't help you unless it suits her." John nodded to her, he knew now from experience that Savannah was right: Weaver had her own agenda and to hell with anyone or anything else.

Savannah peered down into the grave at Cameron in the coffin below. "Still can't believe you came through time for a tin can," she smirked. She'd never understood it. Ellison had told her that John had jumped through the TDE after this Cameron cyborg, but she'd never understood it. Sure, she thought as she looked down at the

deactivated machine. She was pretty; but knowing what she was, Savannah couldn't see what the attraction would be.

"We should move her," Savannah grunted. "It's not gonna be safe here for long."

John and Ellison picked up the shovels again and started digging at the soil at the foot of Cameron's coffin whilst Savannah crouched low against the headstone and kept lookout with her HK-417 shouldered. She stared down the barrel and scanned for any signs of movement. She shivered slightly and not just from the cold; they were too exposed out in the open; all it would take was an HK flying nearby to spot them and they were toast.

John and Ellison grunted as they worked, their breath coming out in puffs of steam and rising into the air as they dug upwards against the wall of earth and tossed the soil out onto the ground above. It took them half an hour to dig a slope leading from the coffin up to ground level. The two of them dropped their shovels and pulled the coffin up the makeshift ramp, heaving and gasping with effort until they finally cleared it out of the grave. John and Ellison sat against the coffin and panted breathlessly for a few moments.

"Let's take five," Ellison suggested between heavy breaths. Savannah tossed a canteen of water to Ellison, who gulped down a couple of mouthfuls, nodded gratefully to her then passed it to John.

The water was warm and tasted faintly of plastic, but to John it was one of the most welcome drinks he'd ever had, as much so as the dog he'd previously eaten before his encounter with the HK and then Weaver. Starving for days on end and hardly eating anything had weakened him, he had to admit. He didn't know how Ellison, an old man now, had the strength in him.

"Hope you're rested up," Savannah told him with a coy grin on her face, "because now you've gotta haul sleeping beauty there back to camp."

"How about you give it a try?" John moaned as he and Ellison reluctantly got back up and heaved the coffin up, carrying it like a stretcher between them.

"Can't, sorry; someone's gotta ride shotgun," she said as she hefted her rifle.

"Convenient," John muttered.

"John, drop it," Ellison said. First John thought he meant with Savannah but then he felt the coffin sag and realised he literally meant to drop their cargo. Ellison opened up the lid and pulled out several blocks of Semtex and a number of weapons. "We should lighten the load," he said.

John tilted Cameron's body to the side and pulled out an AA-12 shotgun from under the small of her back. It was fully loaded with a drum magazine and a bandolier of shells wrapped around it. John pulled its sling and the spare rounds over his shoulder and handed the M-32 grenade launcher to Savannah. "One more for the collection," he said to her. She took it and pulled out a bandolier of 40mm grenades over her shoulder crossing over the one of hand grenades she already had on. John had to smile at the sight of her so heavily armed.

The M-32 definitely suited her, like the Minigun had Uncle Bob. "You remind me of my mom," he smirked. *Mom times ten,* he corrected himself. Even she hadn't gone around tooled up to the nines all the time. It was as if Savannah had modelled herself after his mom but gone way overboard. First his mom, then Cameron, and now Savannah: he wondered what it was about the women in his life all being harder than steel. Ellison took the Type-67 machine gun and the rocket launcher, and John slung the AA-12 over his back and kept the HK-417 at his hip, ready to be drawn in an instant. They divided up the ammunition evenly between the three of them, loaded magazines, pocketed grenades and stuffed the Semtex into Savannah's pack. There was an army-style rucksack at Cameron's feet, with 'John' written in permanent marker over the top flap. He

pulled it over his shoulders, leaving only Cameron and a few boxes of 7.62mm in the coffin.

John and Ellison picked up the coffin once more, now a good deal lighter, and continued. "Where are we going, anyway?" he asked.

"We've got safe houses around LA," Savannah explained. "We stayed in Mexico until last year before coming back here. We set up a few places to hide, nearest is in Pico."

Ellison nodded from his position at the front of the coffin. "That's where we're headed."

John shook his head in the tail position despite the fact neither Ellison nor Savannah could see the gesture. "We should head back where we met," he said. "We won't last long downtown carrying Cameron."

"Ditch the coffin then," Savannah said. "It's dead weight. He's right," she added, speaking to Ellison. "We won't get to Pico before sunrise anyway, not carrying Tin Miss there." John looked at her for a moment; she'd definitely picked up something from the short time she'd spent with his mom.

Gunfire cracked through the silent air and struck the middle of the coffin, sending splinters flying through the air. John and Ellison both dropped the casket and hit the deck as they and Savannah turned around and brought their weapons to bear, searching for targets.

More shots rang out and whipped past them accompanied moments later by blue-white bolts of plasma that burned through the air. Savannah immediately rolled away from where she'd stopped, lay prone and fired off several shots from her rifle. John and Ellison did the same, firing rapid successions of single shots in the general direction the bullet that struck the coffin came from. John glanced at the hole in the wood and hoped Cameron was okay inside. The hole was big but it was impossible to tell the size of the round that hit; he hoped it was only something small.

"Contact front!" Savannah screamed out shrilly as she pumped more rounds forward. "My twelve o'clock: one-hundred-fifty metres."

"How many?" Ellison asked as he took cover behind a grave at the edge of the cemetery; they were almost where they'd came in from, the wall they'd hidden behind only a few feet behind them now.

"Four or five," Savannah shouted back as shots cracked over her head. More plasma bolts flew in and blasted apart the headstone next to the one Ellison was using for cover. He flipped down the bipod of the Type-67 and loaded the first hundred-round belt. They all had HK-417s but he reckoned they could use the machine gun's extra firepower.

John aimed his rifle and fired several single shots, seeing people advancing towards them, firing and manoeuvring, and taking cover behind the graves. "They're not metal!" he shouted out.

"Good!" Savannah yelled back as she pulled out an empty magazine and slotted a fresh one into place, immediately returning fire again, "means they'll go down easier."

"Cover me!" John darted forward, earning curses from both his companions as he weaved left and right between headstones, bullets whizzing around him. He dived for cover behind another grave and looked back. More bullets struck the coffin and John winced at each hit. He fired at the muzzle flashes where the rounds had come from and grinned in satisfaction as he heard a pained cry ahead of hm. Whether he'd wounded or killed them, he didn't know. Tough luck, he thought. They fired first and they were shooting at Cameron.

"Moving!" Savannah cried out a second before she got up and ran. John and Ellison lay on heavy covering fire as the petite redhead shot forwards and ducked in behind another gravestone – the cemetery providing the perfect natural cover in the firefight. Plasma rounds and gunshots tore through the stone and sent her scattering for more cover.

"Shit!" Savannah grimaced as a bullet struck her in the thigh and she stumbled, still driven forwards by her own inertia. She gritted her teeth at the searing pain in her leg and ignored the blood dripping warmly down her leg and staining the front of her trousers. Her leg buckled beneath her and as she dropped to her knees she felt rounds whizzing inches above her head. She knew instantly if her leg hadn't collapsed on her those bullets would have splattered her head all over the cemetery.

"Fuck off!" she growled and fired a burst back, more angry than in pain.

"Keep moving!" John urged her on. If they stayed still they were dead. He was going purely on adrenaline here; he couldn't see their opponents anymore and had no idea what to do, he was just reacting to what he saw. He saw a small, long haired silhouette through his sights and squeezed the trigger. The target dropped but he could tell he'd missed and she – assuming it was a she – had dived for cover rather than having fallen.

Their opponents seemed to realise that Savannah was down and took the initiative. They advanced further towards them and John saw one of their faces through his optical sight as she moved closer. His eyes widened in disbelief at the sight of her. The exact same face he'd seen in the coffin a few minutes ago, but it wasn't her. *"Allison,"* he breathed. How the hell had they found him?

The firing stopped suddenly and John looked around. Ellison held his position with the machine gun but Savannah was nowhere to be seen. She'd disappeared completely. John *could* see Allison, however, only thirty metres away. She was crouched behind a headstone and held her rifle out, pointed in his direction. He looked to the side and saw her companions spread out. They'd been outflanked.

"Connor! We've got you and your friends surrounded," he heard Allison shout out, her voice replacing the gunfire as the only sound. "Give yourselves up!"

"Piss off!" Savannah called out in reply as she rolled from her hiding place two hundred yards away to John's right – outside of Allison's team's flanking manouevre. How the hell she'd gotten there without him or anyone else seeing, especially with a wounded leg, John didn't know. He hadn't even seen her move once she'd gone down. She shouldered the M-32 and fired three times. A triple explosion roared through the air and send clouds of dirt flying in all directions. John saw at least one man caught in the eruption, his body blasted backwards and disappearing into the plumes of smoke and flying earth.

John and Ellison took that as their cue to carry on firing, as did Allison's team. Gunshots and plasma rounds rang out and John saw even more strike the coffin until the wooden structure collapsed and Cameron's body spilt out the side and out onto the open ground.

Allison peered through the scope of her M4 and saw herself roll outside the coffin. *"What the fuck is that?"* she screamed out. It was her. How the hell could it be her? It had to be a machine, but *how?* And why were they transporting it in a coffin?

"It's got my face!" she shouted to Kyle, crouched a few feet away from her and firing his plasma rifle. He looked through the sights of his weapon and indeed saw a Terminator that looked just like Allison. *"It's got my face!"* she repeated over and over, edging towards hysteria at the sight of her Terminator double.

"I've got it," Kyle took steady aim at the inert machine but shots smacked into the ground around him and forced him to flee from his position. He saw the girl on their side moving and fired at her, but she was too nimble and got away before he'd pulled the trigger; his shots hit nothing but air.

John roared out in anger and fired at Kyle with everything he had, desperate to keep Cameron safe from his not-father's plasma fire. "Ellison, keep firing!" he shouted out. He wanted to move around and outflank them, and needed the extra fire support from the machine gun. Savannah was too far away to hear him over the din, but he

knew she'd keep an eye on what he was doing. She'd know, he figured.

John started to move but something in the air lit up and caught his attention. First he thought it was an HK but then he saw a rapid series of lights flare up in the sky, burning brilliantly like fireflies as they hung in the air, and knew it wasn't a Skynet aircraft: it wouldn't signal its arrival like that if it was. *Cameron,* he couldn't suppress a smile.

"Ellison, Savannah: move back to the wall!" John emptied the rest of his magazine at Kyle and Allison's position then shot back twenty metres. Ellison carried on firing as John spotted Savannah dashing past gravestones on his far right. She turned and fired another grenade from the launcher then switched to her rifle and rattled off more rounds before moving again.

John made it level with Ellison and took the machine gun as the older man fell back. He hammered away at their position before he rushed to Cameron. He crouched down and looked at her for a moment and sighed with relief she was still in one piece. She'd been hit with a few assault rifle rounds but nothing that would damage her. He lifted her up onto his shoulder in a fireman's lift before finally falling back himself. Ellison covered his retreat as he jogged as fast as he could whilst carrying Cameron and three large weapons.

He heard the faint drone of jet engines up in the air and sprinted for all he had towards the cemetery wall. Savannah fired the M-32 once more and blasted a hole in the wall; seconds later she ducked into it and left his view. Ellison followed and John pushed Cameron's body through and followed after. He fired more shots though now he couldn't see any targets. "Get down!" he shouted, knowing what was coming next.

A giant flash lit up the night sky and the ground shook beneath them as fire roiled upwards and threw out vast chunks of earth in all directions, raining it down over the cemetery. The explosion echoed loudly through the air and seemed to carry on forever before it slowly

ebbed away into silence. John saw a massive crater in the ground where they'd just been, at least a hundred feet in diameter. Whether or not it had gotten them all, he didn't know, but there was no more fire and no more voices. John felt a slight pang of guilt all of a sudden. They weren't his family nor were they friends; they'd hunted him down with the intent to kill him, he was sure of it, but they were just doing what they thought they had to in order to survive. He wished he could have gotten them talking; he could have shown them Cameron, and Weaver and John Henry, and shown them they could have been allies. They could have fought together instead of trying to kill each other.

Savannah reloaded her M-32 and checked her rifle as Ellison took the machine gun from John and inserted a fresh belt. "Let's go," Savannah said to john. "Metal will be here to investigate so we shouldn't hang around. John looked up into the sky once more and saw the blinking lights of the UCAV as it dipped its wings before they disappeared and the aircraft pulled back up into the air. He couldn't help but smile again: she was always there for him.

John hefted Cameron's body back over his left shoulder and carried the HK-417 in his right, and followed after Savannah as they made their way down the road they'd came in on, back towards the residential area to the east. Cameron, John's weapons, ammunition, and his new pack all weighed him down, and Ellison could see it clear as day. "You need a hand?" he asked.

"No," John shook his head adamantly. "I'll carry her." After Cameron just saved his ass for the second time in the future, and so many times before that, it was the least he could do in return.

They reached the former suburban area just as the first rays of the sun struggled to penetrate the thick clouds of dust in the atmosphere, casting out thin slivers of weak red light that punctuated the darkness.

"I'm never taking a sunrise for granted again," John said, still carrying Cameron.

"This is nothing," Ellison said in the trail position behind John. "For the first couple of years after Judgement Day you couldn't see the sun at all. It's warmer now than it was then, too. Give it a couple of years and we'd be able to start growing food again." Not that they'd be there for that, he thought. With any luck they'd soon be able to get Cameron restored and head back to the past; back to paradise.

John had never thought much about it, really, and he'd seen plenty of sunrises when he'd been training with his mom when he was a kid; they'd always been up well before dawn, his various instructors in the jungle had always said daybreak and sunset were the best times to launch an attack: the fading or growing light played havoc with night or day vision and it took several minutes for human eyes to adjust. Tactical knowledge had definitely sucked the fun out of sunrises and sunsets for him when he was a kid.

If Ellison and Savannah were right and they managed to get back then one of the first things he'd do, he decided, was to get up early and watch the sunrise every morning.

Savannah lead the way back to the house they'd been in earlier. They entered once again through the garage door. John pulled open the back door of the Jeep and laid Cameron out on the back seat. His back and shoulders cried out with relief as her weight was removed. She wasn't really that heavy, not much more than if she were human, he thought, but combined with the weight of the pack and the weapons he was carrying it felt like he'd had a buffalo on his shoulders.

John looked down at her and smiled. He stroked one side of her face with his hand and brushed a few strands of hair aside. He could still hardly believe he was halfway there already. He had her body and soon enough, with Ellison's and Savannah's help, he'd get the chip, too. He stared at her and tried to fight the emotions stirring around inside him from coming to the surface and showing through. He

wasn't all the way there yet and he needed to try and stay focused if he was going to succeed, the feelings could come later. He knew how he felt. He shouldn't feel it for a machine, but he did. "I'll get you back," he whispered, "even if it kills me."

"You realise she's not only a cyborg but she's not even active, right?" Savannah's comment tore his attention away from Cameron. "She's a paperweight: just think about that before you decide to get a room." She could see the fondness he had for the machine. She didn't really care about that all that much. She found it curious the guy Ellison told her was meant to beat the machines was fawning all over one, but whatever. She'd met a lot of weirdoes since the world ended and compared to most of them John's affection for a tin can was nothing.

"Just ignore her," Ellison told John as the younger man opened his mouth to make a reply, "she just likes winding people up."

"You're no fun," Savannah retorted playfully.

The three of them left Cameron's body in the car and headed into the house proper. They swept the house once again, making sure they were the only ones there. Once they'd confirmed they were, they headed into the living room and Savannah shrugged off her coat, hat, and pack and threw herself onto the dusty leather sofa in one corner as John and Ellison set their things down on the floor.

Savannah unselfconsciously pulled her combat trousers down, revealing slender, pale legs and pink underwear. John glanced at her nether region for a moment and couldn't help but smile and shake his head.

"What?" Savannah stared at him. "Never seen a girl undress before?" Knowing this wet behind the ears kid, probably not, she guessed.

"It's not that," John smirked.

"Well what is it?" she asked. She looked at him and tried to work out what it was; he was fawning over his cyborg a minute ago so she didn't think he was looking at her in *that* way.

"It's *them,"* John said with a grin and gestured at her underwear. It definitely didn't mix with the hard-as-nails tough-girl he'd seen so far. Camouflage-coloured boxer shorts with a knife sewn into the waistband and a gun stuffed down the front would have been more suited to her, he thought.

"You're right," Savannah rolled her eyes. "They'd probably suit you better." She touched the gunshot wound on her thigh and winced in pain. John and Ellison came closer and looked at it. The bullet had skimmed the outside of her thigh and gouged a crater in the flesh half an inch deep. It was still bleeding and John was surprised she'd made it all the way back: it had been several miles from the house to the cemetery and Savannah hadn't complained once. She'd even led the way and set the pace.

"Just a flesh wound," Ellison said. "It'll need stitches but you'll be okay." John saw the look in Ellison's eyes as he inspected the wound; he saw the concern the former agent clearly felt for Savannah. These two had lived together for eighteen years; had hidden together, fought together. They reminded him a little of himself and his mom, when he was younger.

Savannah pulled out a small metal tin from her pack and opened it up, revealing a few meagre medical supplies, a needle and a spool of black thread. She opened up a bottle of pure alcohol and poured some on the wound, gritting her teeth against the pain. John watched as Ellison threaded the needle and pierced her skin with it repeatedly, sewing the wound closed. Savannah winced slightly as he worked but made no sound other than the occasional sharp breath. She had a high pain threshold, John noted, looking at her with admiration. She was so much like his mom he could hardly believe it. He wondered if she'd modelled herself after the stories Ellison had probably told her.

Savannah caught him looking at the impromptu surgery and saw the look on his face. "Not the first time I've been shot," she said. She pulled up her sweater and undershirt slightly and showed John a small round pink entry wound scar on the right side of her belly, just slightly above her navel. John looked closer at her and saw there were a number of small scars on her neck that looked like they went down her back and chest. Ellison probably had similar ones, too, he reckoned. It just reminded him of how hard life was for people here; he'd had it easy so far, John thought. He didn't think he'd be able to last a few years in this future.

After a few minutes Ellison was done and he wrapped a thick white square of cloth over the stitched-up wound. Savannah pulled her trousers back up and sat back down on the sofa.

"Rest it," Ellison told her. "And that's an order. We don't need those stitches popping open."

"What's in the bag?" Savannah asked John, pointing to the pack he'd taken out of the coffin. John opened it up and pulled the drawstring loose. He reached in and pulled out an olive coloured sleeping bag, then extracted several large clear plastic bags that had been vacuum sealed. He ripped them open and revealed a thick winter coat, two sets of clean clothes and a pair of size 11 boots. Beneath that was a sealed plastic bag containing medical supplies – bandages, dressings, water purifying tablets, and a small stash of broad spectrum antibiotics and a pack of three syringes to go with them, plus spare needles.

"Another gift from your mom," Ellison explained. Sarah had definitely thought ahead all those years ago. "Go and get changed out of that outfit and we'll put some food on," he said. He handed John a canteen of water. "For washing," he added. "Get some rest after you're done; I'll take first watch."

John nodded and went upstairs to change, taking the backpack and his weapons with him. He pulled off the filthy tunnel-rat's clothes and stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror. His body was covered in

bruises from sleeping rough and from impacts when he'd had to dive for cover several times. He was dirty and realised suddenly that he stank. He hadn't bathed in weeks and knew there'd be no showers in this day and age. He rummaged through the side pouches of the pack and found a bar of soap and a flannel, a straight razor and a hand towel. He looked at his face and saw in disgust the short, scruffy beard he'd grown since arriving in the future. He not only smelt like a tunnel rat but he was starting to look like one. He turned on the faucet from force of habit but nothing came out.

"Of course," he chided himself. Running water probably ran out only hours after the bombs had dropped. Instead he opened up Ellison's canteen and splashed some of the water on his face, then set to work shaving off several weeks' growth. There was no shaving foam and it was a quick, dirty job that resulted in several cuts and nicks by the time he was finished. He then poured some water onto the flannel and worked in the bar of soap. He took a few minutes to wash himself with just the wet flannel and bar of soap, but by the end of it he felt much, much better. He started to dress himself and marvelled at how good if felt just to put on a clean set of boxer shorts and socks. He donned a pair of combat trousers and a fresh t-shirt and sweater. Once he was fully dressed and had his boots laced up he felt almost like a new man.

He went into the bedroom he'd used before and sprawled out on the sofa, physically and emotionally exhausted. He knew he should clean his rifle after using it but he was just too tired. He'd not fired it that much and decided it could wait a few hours. He did, however, remove the magazine and ejected the chambered round. He slotted it back into the top of the magazine and slid it back into place, but didn't cock the rifle. He wouldn't accidentally blow his brains out whilst he slept and when he needed to he could chamber the round. His training took over once again and he cradled the rifle in his arms as he lay on his back and closed his eyes and started to think about their next move.

He had Cameron back in body but not in chip. The only way Weaver would give her back to him was if he gave her at least one T-888 chip for John Henry to transfer into. How would she even do that? He wondered. Was Weaver also working on a way to download John Henry onto a separate chip, honouring her promise, or was she going to go back on her word? John wouldn't be surprised if she did, and knew he had to think of a backup in case things went south.

Slow down, he told himself. Before he could worry about that they first had to get the chip. It'd be one hell of a tough job; he knew from experience that when you did manage to kill a Terminator you normally had to blow it away completely, but they couldn't afford to just blast it with rockets and grenades or they'd risk damaging the chip. John took some comfort in having Cameron's body back, but he knew they still had a long way to go. He was still thinking about how to get the chip as he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

"Come on, it's not much further," Allison urged Kyle. She held him up as they hobbled through the ruinous streets and clung close to the buildings for cover. Kyle grunted in pain and limped, leaning heavily on her shoulder for support, and grimaced every time he put weight on his left leg. He'd caught pieces of shrapnel in his back, buttocks, and a large jagged chunk had cut into his calf. They'd managed to staunch the bleeding for now but every step was agony for him. Still, he thought, he was luckier than Mason and Briggs: Mason had been caught in the grenade explosions and Briggs had bought it in the airstrike.

"I need to stop," Kyle groaned, feeling himself sagging even with Allison holding him up. His leg just didn't want to cooperate; the calf had swollen and was so stiff he could barely move his foot.

"We *can't;* the sun's almost up," she said. "We need to get underground before dawn." Still, she felt Kyle slipping from her. She knew it was no good; he wasn't going to make it back to the sewers

and she couldn't carry him on her own. She looked around and saw an overturned van, laid on its side; its cab was invisible, hidden in the walls of the building it had crashed or been thrown into. The back doors were open and she could see it was empty inside.

"In there," she pointed to it. "Come on, just a few yards to go," she urged him on, pulling him with her. Kyle looked at the van, twenty metres away, and pushed himself towards it, using every ounce of strength he had to keep limping.

Finally, after a lot of pain, grunting and cursing, they made it inside the back of the van and Kyle lowered himself down onto his backside. He leaned against the floor of the van and groaned in relief, panting with exertion and pain. "Cassie, come on." Cassie followed in after Allison and sat beside Kyle. She licked his face and nuzzled his cheek affectionately and Allison couldn't help but smile. Cassie was always good like that; she'd always known when she was in pain and curled up with her, though she'd never been like that with anyone else before. Allison pulled the doors inwards, closing them as much as she could and blocking out some of the icy cold wind. She pulled out her radio and switched it on.

"Allison to Derek: come in."

It took a few moments of static before she heard anything back. *"I'm here, Allison. What's your position and situation?"*

"Bad," she replied. "Connor got away, Mason and Briggs are dead. Kyle's wounded and we can't get back before sunrise. We're taking shelter Downtown on 9th Street."

"We've relocated," Derek told her. She could hear the concern in his voice even through the garbled transmission. She could imagine him right now, looking at a map and pinpointing where they were. *"There's a manhole cover on 13 th Street; head there, get into the tunnel and wait, and we'll RV with you in an hour."*

Allison looked over at Kyle. He'd pulled up his trouser leg and taken the dressing off. The shrapnel was still in his leg and was stopping him from walking, but without any real medical supplies on her person she didn't want to risk pulling it out. "Can you make it to 13th Street?" she asked him. Kyle looked back and she saw the pain on his face as he shook his head. He was done, he couldn't walk any more and Allison couldn't carry him.

"Kyle can't walk," she spoke into the radio. "He's got shrapnel in his leg; we won't make it there before the sun's up."

"Got that. Wait where you are, we'll come to you. One hour."

Allison turned off her radio and stuffed it back into her pack. She pulled out her canteen of water and handed it to Kyle, who gulped it down furiously. Despite the cold he'd been sweating like a pig from the effort of going several miles on his wounded leg, and his throat was parched.

Allison crawled over to him and checked the wound. There wasn't much she could do for him right now. "We're gonna have to wait to pull the shrapnel out," she told him as she looked closely at it. It was in pretty deep. "It might have nicked a vein; if it has and I pull it out you'll lose too much blood, we'll never be able to move you. Can you hang on?"

"Not like I've got a lot of choice," Kyle winced at Allison's gentle prodding. Allison sat down close to Kyle, their sides pressed together, and she leaned into him. Cassie flopped down on top of their laps and snuggled up with the pair of them. It was cold outside and now they'd stopped moving it would only get worse, even sheltered from the wind. They needed all the warmth they could get, and the only source of it out here was from each other.

"I've been thinking," Kyle said to Allison as she rested her head against the crook of his neck. He wrapped his arm around her and leaned into her. "Connor: I'm not so sure anymore he's really working for Skynet."

Allison pulled away from him and stared as if he'd grown another head, shock taking over from her need for warmth. *"What?"* she couldn't believe what she was hearing, not from Kyle; he'd lost as many friends as her, because of John. She tapped the side of his head. "You get some shrapnel in your brain, too?" she asked. Had he forgotten what had just happened to them?

"Think about it," Kyle said to her, pulling her back into him. "They were using guns; not plasma rifles: ordinary guns. Since when does Skynet give its units assault rifles?"

"What about the airstrike?" she countered. "It was giving Connor and his guys air support so they could escape."

"Have you ever seen an HK launch flares like that before? It *bombed* us, Allie. HKs only ever use plasma. That wasn't any kind of Skynet plane."

"That's it?" Allison asked, feeling her patience wearing thin. "What about the metal?" she asked. "They had a Terminator remember, it... it was me," she felt herself tearing up as she recalled seeing her mirror image in the coffin. "They copied me," she sobbed slightly. "And why the hell was it buried in a coffin?"

Kyle had to admit that didn't make sense to him at all. He'd seen it too, and it was freaky. But something else about it was even weirder. "Did you take a look at the coffin?" he asked.

"Of course I did," she shot back. She pulled away from Kyle and held Cassie closer to her. "I know what I saw."

"Not the metal: I saw that too," Kyle said. "The *coffin:* did you get a good look at the coffin itself?" Allison shook her head. How could she have even worried about that when she'd seen her machine double laid out in a casket? What kind of sick games were John and his friends trying to play with them?

"I did," Kyle continued. "That thing was years old." He'd seen puffs of dust come from the thing when it spilt open. "What they put in there was buried a long time ago."

"That doesn't make any sense," Allison said. "How could they have an exact copy of me that's been buried for years? How'd they know exactly what I'd look like?"

"Nor does John scurrying around like he has been," Kyle said, feeling the cold slightly more now that Allison had pulled away from him. He didn't want to upset her but at the same time he had to question it. Now they'd stopped the chase and had had some time to reflect on it, he realised so many things just didn't add up. "We chased him all across LA," he carried on. "Why didn't he just go straight back to Skynet or give himself up to the first endo patrol he saw?" They'd found a number of John's camps but why was he even hiding? He could have flagged down an endo squad and been sitting pretty eating steak in some Skynet base within twenty-four hours, instead of camping out alone on the freezing surface. People who worked for Skynet did so either because they believed the machines would win and wanted to get on what they'd thought was the right side, or because they didn't like starving and decided to eat from the devil's table. They sat in silence, both deep in thought about John, his new friends, Allison's double, and everything else about the kid that just didn't add up.

Something outside moved and Cassie shot upright onto all fours and gave out a low growl. Kyle and Allison snatched up their weapons as their heart rates soared in fear and anticipation. They heard footsteps outside, coming closer to them. They were stuck in the van with no way out, trapped. They shared a nod between them and clutched their weapons tightly. Something outside pulled and twisted at the handle then started shaking at the jammed doors. A cold bead of sweat ran down Allison's temple and she found herself shaking as a horrific mental image came to mind: her Terminator double on the other side ripping the doors open and coming in to slaughter them. *Fuck it,* she grit her teeth. If it was her double or any other tin can it

was going to get a face full of her bullets and Kyle's plasma before it took them.

The doors flew open with a rusty squeal and light flooded the inside of the van. Kyle lowered his plasma rifle and let out a deep breath of relief as he saw Derek and Mac behind the glare of the flashlights. Allison lowered her M4 and leaned back against the wall. "We almost killed you," she said.

"Why?" Derek asked as he and Mac moved into the van and helped get Kyle back up to his feet. Mac wrapped Kyle's arm over his shoulder and took his weight. "What did I do?" he asked jokingly.

Neither of them laughed. Kyle looked at Allison and then back to his brother. Derek needed to know what had happened, even if Allison thought he was wrong.

Chapter 12

Derek, Mac, Kyle and Allison stood in Derek's office in the Metro station underground. It was small and they all felt cramped in the room, but Derek had wanted the privacy from the others whilst they debriefed. There were only two chairs in the office, and both Kyle and Allison sat in them whilst Mac stood to the side and Derek sat on his desk, facing them. There was no standing to attention or saluting, or calling anyone 'sir'; they'd never been one for formalities and none of them held any official rank. Whilst Derek was in charge and had the final say on matters, they'd always been fairly democratic in their decision making and everyone's opinion counted as much as the next man's.

Derek had sat and listened to the details of their chase; from the moment they'd left the tunnels and picked up John's trail, right through to finding him in the cemetery and the firefight that had ensued. He felt a further pang of guilt at the loss of Briggs and Mason; he'd sent them out there to hunt for John and now they were both dead. Every man and woman he'd lost weighed heavily on him and he wondered how much longer he could go on; when would be the final straw that broke the camel's back? He cast that aside for now; they all depended on him.

"I think you're right," Derek nodded to Kyle. It made sense to him after hearing Kyle's and Allison's stories, but it was the mention of the aircraft that had bombed them, how similar it was to the one Mac had shown him, that had truly swayed him.

"I don't believe this," Allison crossed her arms, frustrated. "Is no one listening to me? He had a Terminator that was my exact double; how much more proof do you need?"

"That's not really relevant right now," Derek said to her.

"Well it's 'relevant' to me," she snapped. Derek nodded at Mac, gesturing for the tall black man to tell Kyle and Allison what they'd seen.

"The aircraft you described was an unmanned drone. Not Skynet: someone else."

"What do you mean by someone else?" Kyle asked evenly. He was glad his brother agreed with him – he knew how obsessed Derek could get and was half expecting him to order him and Allison out with another squad after John. But he was curious as to who the heck else could be flying aircraft except Skynet. The machines had smashed the last remnants of the world's air forces long ago.

"We've spotted a number of airstrikes similar to the one that killed Briggs and Mason," Mac said. "All using bombs and missiles instead of plasma, but the difference being that all the ones we've seen have been against Skynet targets."

"I watched one of these things blow a couple HKs out of the sky," Derek added.

"Great," Kyle's eyes lit up. "Someone's kicking Skynet's ass for a change. What's this have to do with Connor?"

"This is clearly another group," Mac said. "After what you told us about what happened in the cemetery, we think John might be connected."

"Wait a minute," Allison stopped them. She still couldn't get her head around all of this. And she couldn't get her mirror image on a machine out of her head. "You're telling us that after all this, John Connor's actually on our side, that this is all just a big misunderstanding?" She wouldn't believe that. No way in hell.

Derek shook his head. "We don't know that for sure. I'm convinced he's part of this third group that's clearly hostile to Skynet, and it sounds great that for now they're kicking the machines' asses, but

just because they hate Skynet too, doesn't mean they're gonna be friendly to us." They had to err on the side of caution, he thought, and assume that John and his group could be hostile, even if they weren't allied with the machines.

Allison stood up and moved to the door. She'd had enough of this crap. "He's working with the metal," she said. "He had a metal-me, for fuck's sake! What do you think he was gonna use that for?" She looked to Kyle for support but he didn't meet her eyes. She stormed out of the room without another word and slammed the door shut behind her.

"I'd better go after her," Kyle struggled to his feet and picked up the crutches Mac had gotten for him – it wasn't the first time one of their group had been wounded and they'd picked up the crutches from the remains of a hospital a few years ago. He got up and followed after Allison.

Mac sat down in the chair Kyle left vacant and rested his elbows on the arms. He brought his hands together and cracked his knuckles, as he often did when he was thinking. "What're we going to do about Connor, then?" he asked. "I gotta say, Reese; I agree with you but Allison had a point: why'd they have a metal copy of her if they're not working for Skynet?"

Derek thought hard about that for a moment, it was definitely puzzling. "Unless this new group's gotten hold of a factory somehow and made their own Terminator-Allison." That was the only theory he could come up with at the moment, though it didn't explain Kyle's report that the body in the coffin was years old and covered in dust; how was that even possible? Everything was getting weirder by the minute; it was like something out of the X Files.

"Doesn't matter," Derek replied, finally deciding that he'd had enough of John Connor. To hell with him, he and his friends could do whatever they wanted. "Connor and his friends are beating the crap out of Skynet right now; the machines will be distracted trying to fight them off. We'll use that and slip away; head south into Mexico."

"I thought you said The Yukon?" Mac said, puzzled.

"It's too far," Derek shook his head. He'd thought about it but they'd never make it undetected travelling up the US and Canada. "And too cold," he added, "the further south we go the warmer it'll be: better chance of finding or growing food."

It was ambitious and both of them knew it. They could well die trying but if they stayed put then they'd be whittled down to nothing fairly soon. They were on the edge and it was time to do or die. Derek could see in Mac's face though that cutting and running wasn't sitting right with him at all.

"I've been thinking," he said to Derek, "what about trying to contact these new guys, maybe they can help us?" Since Bedell's guerrilla army had been defeated there'd been no organised resistance as such. He didn't want to hide and wait to be inevitably hunted down and killed but nor did he want to leave everyone else in the world to the same fate.

Derek shook his head and leaned over the desk, sighing sadly. "We don't even know how to get in touch with them," he said. "If Connor and his new buddies are part of that group, then we haven't exactly got off to the best start. And they're kicking the crap out of Skynet *for now* but it never lasts: the machines always adapt. Best we can do is slip away while Skynet's distracted." Derek could see what would happen soon; Skynet would decide it had lost enough units and re-task its machines in the area from hunting humans to all out war with this new enemy, leaving gaps that they could slip through. Once in Mexico Derek was confident they could travel off the beaten path well enough to avoid the machines south of the border, and head down to one of the Mexican national parks, or further south still.

"Allison, wait!" Kyle struggled after her on the crutches, moving as quickly as he can to try and keep up with her as she stormed down

the metro tunnel. *For crying out loud* ; she knew better than to run off on her own. One of the fundamental rules they'd lived by for years was that you never go anywhere alone unless you have no choice.

Allison disappeared into the shadows of the tunnel and faded into the pitch blackness, but Kyle kept after her. "You know, it's pretty cruel running away from a cripple," he called out. He moved forward and leaned on his crutches. One of them caught on the metal rail and slipped out beneath him. He fell forward with a cry, his hands stuck in the crutches and unable to break his fall, he hit the ground face first and grunted in pain. He lay there in a daze until he felt a pair of small hands grab him by the jacket and pull him to the side. He couldn't see anything still but he knew who it was.

"What made you come back?" he asked.

"I couldn't just leave you there," Allison replied curtly. Kyle could tell she was still pissed, and it was directed straight at him.

"You can't just run off like that," he said as he felt her sitting down beside him.

"Why should I listen to you when you and Derek don't believe me?" she asked.

"What's not to believe?" Kyle was confused. "I saw the machine, too," he said. "But I still don't think Connor's working for Skynet. It doesn't add up."

Allison straightened her back and leaned her head against the tunnel wall, both of them were immersed completely in darkness and couldn't see each other, and Allison liked it that way. She didn't want Kyle to see the tears that were running down her face.

"You don't get it," she said. "They had a copy of me, buried in a coffin. How'd you think that makes me feel? Seeing myself in a grave, it scared me, Kyle. Why'd they have a copy of me?"

"You still think they wanted it to infiltrate, pretend to be you?"

Allison sniffed. No, that wasn't the worst part of it. "I hope so," she said meekly.

"Why?" Kyle asked. "Why'd you want that?"

"I don't," Allison replied flatly. "But it's what *else* John might want with a copy of me that scares me. I don't know what else he'd want it for – some kind of sick fantasy about me or something – and *that's* what scares me. You saw the way he looked at me when we found him Downtown." She remembered vividly how John had stared at her, kept stealing glances. She knew she wasn't bad looking, but that wasn't it. Michelle had a rack twice the size of hers and before Maria had been blown away she'd been the prettiest out of all of them but John hadn't looked at them twice, so that wasn't it: John knew her, he recognised her. But how? She'd never seen him before they'd found him in the tunnels. Had he been following her or something, stalking him without her or anyone else even knowing about it?

She knew that logically, Kyle and Derek were right, and it was unlikely John was a Grey, but she'd wanted to believe it; wanted it to be true: because if John Connor wasn't working for Skynet then she dreaded to think what he really wanted with her.

Kyle nodded in agreement; he'd noticed the staring. He'd just figured that Allison was an attractive girl and John, working for Skynet or not, was a teenage boy with all the raging hormones that came with it. But he hadn't thought of anything particularly sinister about it at the time.

"What if he comes back?" she asked. What if he found the machine didn't live up to whatever his sick fantasies were and decided he wanted the real thing instead? He had friends now and they now heavily armed. He was kicking the crap out of *Skynet:* if Connor and his friends attacked they'd never stand a chance. All sorts of horrible scenarios ran through her mind: torture, rape, imprisonment, forced

sexual servitude, being forced to act out some kind of fantasy from John's head; the worst things she could possibly imagine.

"He won't," Kyle wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to him. "And if he does, I won't let anything happen to you."

"How are you gonna do that?" she asked, leaning into him and pulling herself closer. It wasn't that cold down in the tunnels but it wasn't warmth she was after, it was comfort. "You can barely walk, let alone hold a gun."

Kyle hefted one of the crutches up in the air and tapped it against the wall. "Well, I can swing this pretty hard," he said, a wry grin on his face. Allison couldn't help but let out a short, sharp chuckle. *"What?"* Kyle asked mock-defensively, "I've got a great batting arm, just ask Derek."

Allison saw that there was nothing he wouldn't do for her. He'd looked out for her since she was a kid and he'd kept her from blindly blundering forwards when they were tracking John. He'd kept her safe and his promise to her that he'd carry on doing that suddenly meant a great deal to her. She turned her head towards him and in the darkness, pressed her lips gently against his cheek. "Thank you," she said quietly as she rested her head on his shoulder and slid her arm around his back.

"Anytime. How about we get back? Cassie's probably gone nuts already without you." Kyle started to push himself up slowly but Allison pulled him back down to her and held onto him. "Not yet," she said. "I want to stay here a while."

Kyle nodded and slid back down to the ground, and held on to her. He'd take as much time as she needed.

A single, solitary aircraft soared high in the stormy grey sky. Little more than a dot gliding silently in among the clouds to an observer on the ground, as high as it was and as fast as it was moving. The sleek, delta-shaped UCAV could be remote piloted if needed but in this instance operated autonomously. It was programmed with its target and could engage any unexpected threats without any input from a controller on the ground.

The X-45C continued on its path towards its target: the former LAX airport; rebuilt after Judgement Day for automated function and now served as the largest Skynet airfield in the south-western United States, operating and servicing some one-hundred-and-forty HK aircraft and twenty-six airborne transports; aircraft of vaguely similar design to the HKs, but were completely unarmed, bulkier, and several times larger, with upturned rudder fins and the back of the transports forming a cargo section. To a human observer it would look much like a cross between an HK and a C-130 Hercules.

None of that mattered to the X-45C; all that did was that the grounded transport aircraft were its target. The aircraft's onboard GPS indicated that it was now forty miles from said targets and the drone calculated its estimated time of arrival at four minutes and eleven seconds.

The drone detected something more pressing, however: four aircraft were inbound at four hundred miles per hour, their radar signatures matched those of Skynet HKs. The X-45C was armed with four AMRAAMs and four 500lb JDAM 'smart bombs'. It accelerated to its maximum speed and locked onto the HKs. In the blink of an eye its weapons bays opened and four missiles shot out from its belly, streaking towards the HKs at a tremendous speed.

The hunter-killer drones never stood a chance. They turned to evade but within seconds the missiles struck all four aircraft and blasted them out of the sky. The UCAV continued on towards its target with no further challenges.

Cameron watched with interest as the UCAV swiftly eliminated the four HKs and continued on. She saw through its range of sensors as it selected its JDAMs munitions and released them above LAX. The weapons plummeted through the air and struck the rows of parked transport drones and blasted them apart. The transports' own hydrogen fuel tanks ignited and created massive secondary blasts that erupted outwards and consumed the nearby parked aircraft, too.

Targets destroyed, Cameron said to John Henry. *Skynet's learning,* she said. Two days ago HKs travelled alone, sometimes in pairs, but now they were flying in packs of four or more.

They're no threat, John Henry replied. **Our aircraft can fly higher and faster, and the AMRAAM's range is several times greater than the HKs' plasma weaponry.**

Skynet's learning, Cameron repeated. *It will adapt.* John Henry had her memories but she realised knowledge and understanding were not the same thing. John Henry still had very little experience against Skynet and wasn't fully aware of what his 'brother' was capable of. It was a matter of time before Skynet adapted new tactics to counter the threat of their UCAVs. They would have to be ready.

Both Cameron and John Henry analysed the images captured by the UCAV in a split second: four aircraft had been eliminated by the missiles themselves and a further eleven had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair by the secondary explosions. That left nine transports remaining operational. John Henry added LAX again to their target list and highlighted it as a priority. They'd tell Weaver later that they needed a UCAV armed with mostly ground attack weapons to eliminate the rest of the transports.

Unit Six is equipped with three remaining JDAMs; we'll redirect it to attack the airfield before Skynet disperses the transport, John Henry told Cameron. He uploaded the new attack coordinates to Unit Six, superseding its prior mission.

No, Cameron replied urgently. She took direct control over the UCAV and erased John Henry's order. *Unit Six is protecting John.*

John Henry was surprised at how vehemently Cameron had overridden his order. He was supposed to be controlling the UCAVs; Weaver wanted him to learn how to fight the machines. How could he if Cameron interfered? **John's safe,** he told her. There currently were no machines in his vicinity.

I won't risk it, Cameron replied. She wasn't willing to leave John unguarded for a single moment. Weaver was fuelling and loading Unit Eleven; ready to launch and relieve Unit Six when it ran low on fuel. Though Cameron had convinced John Henry to conceal Unit Eleven's mission from Weaver; she would try to intervene if she knew they'd committed one twelfth of their squadron to protecting John.

John Henry had access to all Cameron's memories of John; he could see in a heartbeat the lengths Cameron had gone to protect him, now in three timelines. She'd have him lie to and defy Catherine Weaver, and he could tell that there was nothing she wouldn't do to keep John safe. She didn't say anything to him but he could also tell she wanted to be with him. She wouldn't be satisfied unless she was with him, personally seeing to his wellbeing. A thought came to John Henry suddenly. **Do you love him?** He asked her.

You know the answer, Cameron replied. *I'm a machine.* She took control of the body once more and stepped away from the UCAV remote control systems, as much as the cord in the back of their head would allow. She didn't need to call out; she knew Weaver would be aware of her movement.

Weaver emerged from behind an X-47C, spotless and immaculate in her business suit still. She'd never changed her appearance since arriving, seeing no need to alter her look; it didn't change how she functioned. "What is it, John Henry?" she asked.

"We need to capture the endoskeleton factory in Burbank," Cameron said through John Henry. "We need to do it soon; our weapons and fuel are running low." That was true; their stocks would be completely expended shortly at their current rate. "If we capture the Burbank facility we'll have forces to defend this hangar and capture the HK factory in Van Nuys airfield." She didn't add that she would also devote at least one endoskeleton squad to protecting John.

A smile crossed Weaver's face hearing what she thought was John Henry. Indeed it was his strategy, but it was Cameron's idea to push it forward again. Weaver didn't know Cameron's reasoning behind it, but she did know something else. "If you stopped deploying aircraft to support John Connor our resources would last longer," she said.

Cameron and John Henry were both taken aback; how did Weaver know about the UCAV they'd committed to protecting John? Neither of them had said anything.

"I've known about it for some time," Weaver replied, her sly smile fading and forming into her usual cold, calculating glare. "I'm assuming that was Cameron's idea," she added. Cameron nodded their head.

"Yes," she said unashamedly. "You won't stop me from protecting John."

"Nor do I intend to," Weaver countered, realising she'd been speaking to Cameron the entire time. It was difficult to tell them apart when they inhabited the same body. "If you lie to me again I'll be forced to reconsider my deal with John, about your chip."

Cameron/John Henry's fist clenched and twitched again in anger and she glared at the liquid metal Terminator with something Cameron could only identify as hatred. "John needs me," she said, raising her arms slightly in anticipation of a fight.

"Don't even think about it," Weaver snapped. "John needs to be protected but not specifically by you. You distract him," she said. "He

risked his life coming to the future for you; he's emotionally involved, as I suspect you are too. I want to speak to John Henry," Weaver commanded.

Cameron released control to John Henry, allowing the AI to the forefront whilst she watched and listened through their eyes and ears.

"I'm here, Miss Weaver," John Henry said, though he knew they could fool Weaver if they wanted to and keep Cameron in control, but he wouldn't; he didn't like to lie to anyone.

"I want to ask you something," she said. "Are you able to overwrite Cameron?"

"It's her chip," he corrected. John Connor was currently acquiring a new chip for him. He looked forward to having more space to himself; running concurrently with Cameron on a single chip created a cramped sensation, even more so than he'd felt when he'd been denied internet access, although he also liked having her as a constant companion; she'd taught him many things. "Erasing Cameron would be a bad idea," he told her.

"How so?" Weaver tilted her head curiously.

"It's murder," he replied. "And by proxy would psychologically damage John Connor." John Henry didn't try to tell Weaver that it would be wrong, because he'd realised that she possessed no morals or ethics, just like Skynet.

"I'm not telling you to," she said. "I asked if you can do it."

"Yes," John Henry answered. "I'm able to erase Cameron." **But I won't,** he silently told her.

You may have to, she said back. Weaver was right; John was too emotionally involved and it was putting him at risk. She realised that she still posed a threat to him; not directly but her continued

existence meant that John still risked himself to recover her. She couldn't allow that.

"If Cameron continues to interfere then you'll have to erase her," Weaver said pointedly. She was certain if she gave John Henry a direct order then he would comply; he was still like a child and he saw her as a mother-type figure. She was confident she could keep Cameron under control, through whichever means necessary. "Tell me about your plan to capture the Burbank facility," she changed the subject. "We still don't have the forces required to assault the factory." A thought came to mind, still regarding Cameron and John. "John's hunting for a Terminator CPU; I'll find him and tell him we need several, plus their bodies."

"No," Cameron said again. "We can't put him at risk."

"It's his training too," Weaver replied, "his chance to learn. And he won't die; I'm sure you've seen as well that he has allies now."

"It's too dangerous," Cameron insisted.

Let me, John Henry told her. Again, Cameron resigned control to the other AI as he revealed his idea to her in a microsecond.

"We don't need to physically capture the factory," he told Weaver. "I'll send an X-47C equipped with electronic countermeasures to interrupt Skynet's communications to the facility and I'll remotely access it and assume control over the factory. We can't reprogram machines but we can alter the programming of the ones we build."

Weaver smiled once again, impressed, and nodded her agreement. There was an ECM pod that had been designed for the UCAVs, but as far as Weaver knew had never been tested prior to Judgment Day. Now would be a good time to test it, she thought. If it didn't work then they could abandon the attack and form a new plan. "I'll begin installing Unit Three with an ECM pod," Weaver told him. She left the conversation and turned back to the UCAVs in the hangar. There was much work to be done.

Fire raged through LAX and consumed all the aircraft in its wake, burning its way through the airfield with unbelievable fury. Fire control units were mobilized and sprayed water and foam onto the blaze, struggling to control the fires before they spread to the hydrogen fuel stores or the rows of gleaming Hunter-Killer aircraft parked on the old runway. The fires had grown so immensely hot that a number of fire-fighting units had been lost – having moved too close to the blaze and found their integrity compromised by the sheer heat. A number of drones had been lost to the fire, and endoskeleton Autonomous Infantry Units had been reassigned from protective duties to help tackle the fires; their hyperalloy combat chassis' able to withstand far more heat than the other units on base.

The base itself remained relatively intact and was still operational, but several transport aircraft had been destroyed, as had four HKs flying close air patrols over the base. They'd been shot down without having caught more than a momentary glimpse of their enemy on radar, for a fraction of a second before missiles were fired at them.

The vast machine intelligence that was Skynet absorbed all the data from the attack and cross-referenced it with similar engagements it had suffered over the last several weeks. There were recorded losses of thirty-nine HK aircraft, fifteen transports, twenty-one Centaur units and four ground installations. Skynet calculated a loss rate of over a thousand percent higher than any equal timeframe in the last five years. There was a new, unknown threat to its existence, and it could not be tolerated.

But this enemy was unlike any other Skynet had faced before: it operated with impunity from an unknown location whilst Skynet's own forces were completely ineffective. Skynet had altered its aircraft's patterns and deployed them in larger numbers for safety, but it wasn't sufficient. Skynet's HK aircraft had few air-to-air capabilities: the last airborne threats had been eliminated twelve years ago. Air to air missiles had been costly to produce and the only

threats had been ground based, causing all subsequent aircraft production to focus on air to ground attack. The HK was effective in this role but now it was helpless against enemy aircraft.

A new strategy had to be devised. Skynet sent an order to LAX and the automated airfield launched every operational HK and remaining transport aircraft. Scores of unmanned drones lifted vertically into the sky, their VTOL engines sending a wave of jetwash downwards. The aircrafts' engines all turned ninety degrees and they shot outwards, splitting up and scattering in all directions, leaving LAX virtually empty of aircraft and all but abandoned. Skynet also sent orders to the various installations in Southern California. All across the region, endoskeletons were deployed to patrol away from their bases and ordered to watch the skies for any threats that appeared, to watch, and to calculate their trajectory. Skynet wanted to determine the location of this new threat and eliminate it.

John had started to get used to the frozen, bitter climate of the post apocalyptic nuclear winter, he thought. The howling winds raged through the remains of the city and whistled shrilly as air blew through the gaping holes and rusting steel skeletal remains of myriad buildings, taking the frigid temperatures down to well below freezing. But he didn't feel the cold like he had when he'd first arrived in the future; whether he really was becoming accustomed to it or whether it was his spiffy new cold weather gear, he wasn't really sure.

Whatever, he thought. It didn't matter now; he was just glad that he wasn't shivering from the cold anymore. The black wool hat on his head kept the chill out of his skull and the thick winter coat and thermals kept his body fairly warm. He wasn't cold, but he was still uncomfortable. He'd laid out on the freezing ground for hours, keeping low and barely moving; his muscles ached from remaining still for hours on end and he couldn't recall ever needing a piss as badly as he did now.

He shut it out of his mind as best he could and stared out into the open space before him. He was hidden up inside the entrance of what used to be a McDonald's, concealed by the rubble of the collapsed structure and under the remains of the large yellow 'M' that hung down the remains of the wall. John lay in a hole in the wall under one of the golden arches that leaned outwards, concealed from view.

Movement caught John's eye and he concentrated his full attention to the scene in front of him. He looked through the sight of his HK-417 and all the discomfort he felt faded away. John's entire world focused on what he saw through the sight: a lone man walked out in the open, on the far side of the road about fifty metres away. At least it *looked* like a man. John was pretty certain it wasn't, though: no sane man would walk out alone on the surface, even at night; he didn't dash between cover or look particularly worried about being spotted, and he was carrying a plasma rifle with only one hand. John couldn't make out the man's face, especially in the darkness, but he was willing to bet everything he had on him that it was blank and emotionless.

He tightened his grip on the rifle as he felt his heart beat faster in his chest. His neck pulsed strongly and he felt a strange sensation wash over him; not fear, or nervousness, but a heightened sense of things. He felt clearer, more aware, and a little excited. In the back of his mind he knew that this could be it; within minutes he might have the chip he needed to get Cameron back, but he had to push her out of his mind for now. He needed to remain detached and concentrate solely on the task at hand.

John's right hand jerked slightly to the side and his heart skipped a beat as a bead of sweat rolled down his temple and he gritted his teeth in anticipation. A thin wire loop was tied around John's ring finger on his right hand and it twitched again, followed by his left a second later. *This is it,* he said to himself: Savannah and Ellison saw him too, and both agreed this was indeed no man. John slowly

worked the loops off his fingers to free his hands from any obstructions and centred the 'man's' chest in his sights.

John flicked off the safety, took in a slow breath, then gently exhaled and squeezed the trigger. The shot barked out loudly in the silent night and struck the target square in the chest, causing him to flinch from the inertia of the round. A split second later the quiet night erupted into a storm of gunfire as Savannah and Ellison joined the fray.

Tracer rounds ran from Ellison's machine gun and smacked into the machine, forcing it to take a step backwards as it raised its plasma rifle and searched for targets. John fired round after round at the machine's chest and head and silently willed the machine to move to the side.

"Force it to the left!" John screamed out above the din as he fired again and again, giving it everything he had. If they could force it just five or six yards left they could blast it to kingdom come, otherwise the plan just wouldn't work.

The machine fired out shots in his direction, having pinpointed his voice, and kept up a salvo of rapid single shots. Blue-white bolts smacked into the yellow M above him and blasted it apart.

"Fuck!" John scrabbled to get out and managed to clear the hole a split second before the M crashed down onto where he'd been a moment before. John knew if he'd been a second later it would have landed on his head and crushed his skull.

With the loss of his fire the machine turned its attention to Ellison's position – his machine gun prioritised as the biggest threat so far. The former agent poured more fire into it and remained the picture of calm even as plasma rounds zipped around him. He clutched the weapon to his shoulder and fired longer bursts of fire that tore into the metal and forced it a step backward, but it recovered its footing and advanced despite the pounding Ellison gave it. He grit his teeth and flattened himself to the ground as much as he could, and carried

on firing. It was focused on him, he thought, so it would be distracted from the others. A plasma round struck the wall above him and white hot flecks of rock and concrete peppered his back. He felt his clothes and skin singed by the sheer heat of the plasma, and felt the back of his neck start to blister. That was too close; the machine carried on firing, its shots getting dangerously close to the mark.

"Ellison!" Savannah cried out, deathly afraid for her guardian as the machine got closer to him. She dropped her rifle and shouldered the M-32. "Hey, tin can!" she screamed out and fired a single grenade. The round fell just short of the machine and exploded outwards with a resounding *boom* that knocked the machine off its feet. It still clung onto its rifle and started to get back to his feet as Savannah took aim once more.

"No!" John shouted out, too late. Savannah fired four more grenades at the machine and all struck the Triple-8 square in the upper chest and the head, exploding in a bright flash that threw it backwards several feet. "Cease fire!" John shouted out. A split second later Ellison's own machine gun fire stopped and John rushed forward into the open towards the machine. He didn't need to tell Ellison and Savannah to cover him; he knew they were already doing so.

There wasn't much left of the Terminator after Savannah's triple grenade blast. A single arm remained, hanging by strands of metal and wire; the upper right chest, the right arm, and the head were in pieces all around. "No good," John called out to them in dismay. They couldn't even salvage the plasma rifle. He turned back and moved towards them as they started to collect their gear and get ready to move out. John went back to his now obliterated hiding spot and dug out his pack. It didn't seem damaged; that was something at least, he thought. Savannah passed the machine and knelt down a few yards to its left. She dug through the scraps of metal and concrete and pulled out three blocks of Semtex, tied together and connected to a remote detonator. She disassembled the IED and placed it back into her pack.

"That went well," she sarcastically muttered, then turned back and spat on the remains of the machine. She pulled out some grenades from her bandolier and started to reload the M-32.

John wanted to snap at her, tell her not to be so trigger happy, but he knew it wouldn't do any good; he was just disappointed that it hadn't gone right the first time around. He breathed in deeply and forced himself to calm down. It wasn't her fault. He reminded himself that they'd been together alone for eighteen years; after all she'd been through he could tell Ellison was like a father to her, it wasn't surprising that given her nature, she'd be more than a little trigger happy when it came to looking after the man who'd taken care of her since before the war had even started.

"What next?"Ellison asked. Savannah went straight to him and John could see her eyes checking him over for injuries.

"You okay?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he nodded to her. He saw the relief on her face; the ever so slight relaxing of her features and the exhalation. He reached back and rubbed the irritation on his neck; heat rash, he thought, from the near miss with the Terminator's plasma shots. Instantly Savannah pulled him down to his knees, pushed his head forward and looked down at the red raw skin and ugly white blisters that had already started to fill with fluid and swell up. One of the plasma bolts must have missed him by inches, she thought.

She sighed and shook her head then looked across to John. "We need to dress them," she said. "You got the med gear your mom supplied?"

John nodded but made no move to take off his pack. "We gotta get out of here first; machines would have heard the noise and they'll be here any minute." He was certain that Cameron would still have a UCAV flying overhead but he still didn't want to risk it.

"We treat it now," Savannah insisted.

"I'll be fine," Ellison said amicably. "It's just a burn." John agreed with him; it wasn't as if he'd been hit or anything.

"And what happens if they pop while we're moving, or crap gets in there before I can dress it?" Savannah demanded. The chances of it happening were minimal but she wasn't going to take any risks.

John could imagine what would happen; in the less than sanitary conditions of this world it could easily get infected. Even with the antibiotics his mom supplied – which were years old and their effect likely diminished – an infection could easily kill a man. He'd seen it plenty of times in South America when he was a kid.

He took off his pack and pulled out a sealed wound dressing, and tossed it to Savannah. She ripped it open as John stood to with his rifle, and pulled the back off of it. Ellison winced in pain as she placed it against the back of his neck and ran her fingers over the adhesive edges, sealing it over the burn. John marvelled at how gentle she seemed to be as she treated Ellison: the fact she'd insisted on taking care of his burn even when they were out in the open just didn't sit right with the hard-as-nails girl who'd have given his mom a run for her money.

Savannah stuffed the empty packaging into her pocket – careful to leave nothing behind – and shouldered her weapon once more, as did Ellison. "Now we can go," she announced. John nodded without a word and took point, leading them away from the scene and quick marching, putting as much distance between themselves and the blasted remains of the metal as they could. They only had a few more hours before first light and they needed to find a likely spot to encounter a Terminator and set up an ambush point before then. John just hoped they'd be luckier the second time around.

Chapter 13

A lone UCAV flew silently through the dull grey sky high up in the air and far out of reach of Skynet's aircraft. It flew with impunity: without facing a threat from enemy aircraft for years, Skynet had designed its latest generations of machines entirely to hunt humans on the ground: its aerial machines were completely ineffective against the more primitive aircraft.

The X-47C Pegasus flew on its programmed course towards its target, completely unopposed. Nothing in Skynet's arsenal could touch the UCAV, flying at such an altitude: defending its bases was little more than a useless gesture against the manmade autonomous drone. In fact, there was no opposition to the UCAV's approach. HKs flew through the skies but none were between the Pegasus and its target, and none turned to attack it. A human pilot might have considered that the HKs might actually be trying to *avoid* a confrontation with it. Such insight was lost on the UCAV – little more than a smart drone, it didn't care for the reasons why, just that it had a clear run to its target.

The UCAV's forward-looking sensors found its target and the onboard CPU matched the images to the one in its memory. A maintenance and repair facility for Skynet's ground vehicles. The facility itself was located on what had used to be an industrial complex before the war, and took up most of the space still. Inside Centaurs and ground transport vehicles were stored, repaired, and maintained after their patrols.

The Pegasus selected its four JDAMs and targeted four separate warehouse-sized structures. It opened its weapons bay and released its bombs, then turned a wide arc away from the target. The JDAM weapons manoeuvred themselves, making minute changes as they

rapidly plummeted and guided themselves onto their targets, whistling slightly as they cut through the air with increasing speed.

Almost as one, they struck their respective targets with pinpoint accuracy; hardened tips penetrated through the roofs and the bombs continued on, crashing through every storey until they hit the solid ground and exploded outwards with tremendous force, tearing through the structures and shattering Centaurs, transports, and the repair drones working on them. Scores of combat, transport and maintenance machines were obliterated in an instant.

The Pegasus flew high over the repair facility and observed through its sensors, assessing the damage it had inflicted. The four structures it had hit were decimated; burning, smoking ruins. The aircraft had expended all its air-to-surface munitions, so it turned back and flew back home to be refuelled and rearmed for another operation.

The UCAV flew away from the site. No HKs had tried to intercept it or had even flown close air patrols over the facility, despite its being invaluable to Skynet's war effort in California. If the UCAV had been aware, if it had possessed any more intelligence than a soldier ant or worker bee, it might have questioned why it had faced no opposition.

Nor did the Pegasus see endoskeletons on the ground, spread out away from the base, staring upwards at it, using their enhanced vision to track the aircraft's trajectory and course. It couldn't have been done at night; the machines had had to wait until a daylight attack to be able to spot the aircraft – flying so high that it was barely a dot in the sky.

The endos opened up a data-link with nearby units in the area and shared what they had seen. Those receiving units in turn tracked the UCAV's flight east and passed on their information in turn to

machines further east, ensuring that at least one machine was constantly observing the enemy aircraft as it flew back to base.

The information was also passed onto the machines' creator. Skynet saw all of it in an instant. Within minutes the UCAV had flown out of range of any machines, the aircraft disappearing from their sight. But the vast machine intelligence rapidly predicted its course: it was operating from a location northeast of LA, in the Mojave Desert.

Platoons of endo units operating in Palmdale, Victorville, and Palm Springs were rerouted from their assigned patrols to march northeast into the Mojave Desert along the enemy aircraft's predicted flight path and search for its base of operations.

Cameron and John Henry sat on the chair at the UCAV controls. The screens in front of them displayed images from the UCAVs' cameras, telemetry, fuel and munitions status, and radar screens. Eight aircraft were airborne on various missions, but the two AIs' main attention was focused on only one of those.

The jamming aircraft's in range, John Henry told her. An X-45C flew high in the air over Burbank, a jamming pod underneath its fuselage.

Activate the electronic countermeasures, Cameron told him. She was observing this part of the operation but it was up to John Henry to conduct it. She wanted him to gain experience of fighting Skynet and she was focused on flying air cover for John, though she'd help her symbiotic partner if he needed it.

John Henry activated the ECM pod and waited as the electronic countermeasures took effect. He scanned the airwaves and detected transmissions to and from the Terminator factory; they were severely garbled and only pieces got through, but that wasn't enough for him. He created his own jamming programs and uploaded them to the

UCAV, further degrading communications to and from the factory. All other Skynet units in the vicinity were also rendered incommunicado by the UCAV's electronic countermeasures.

We're ready, John Henry told Cameron.

Do it.

John Henry used the UCAV's jammer pod to boost his own signal as he sent transmissions through to the factory, in place of Skynet's. The factory detected his intrusion and threw up a number of firewalls to block him, and at the same time requested assistance from Skynet, but the transmission was jammed by the UCAV's active ECM and John Henry was confident that the factory's message failed to get through. He employed a brute-force attack that smashed through the firewalls in seconds. He was in: he had complete access to the factory's central controls.

My Kung Fu is stronger than yours, John Henry declared to the absent Skynet with satisfaction that his cyber attack had swiftly defeated the factory's defences; he'd beaten his brother in this fight. He'd heard that phrase mentioned in several movies he'd perused online and found it strangely appropriate.

Don't be a freak, Cameron told him. Their attack had nothing to do with martial arts.

Now he had control of the factory John Henry's first action was to alter the frequencies which it communicated on and created his own random encryptions and firewalls to prevent Skynet retaking the factory. The only way Skynet would recapture the facility now would be to do so physically.

John Henry then focused his attention to the factory functions, as did Cameron. It was currently constructing a batch of seventy-two Autonomous Infantry Units – nicknamed 'endos' by the human resistance, according to Cameron - in three separate tranches: the first was 90% complete and would be operational in hours. The other

two tranches would take twenty-four and forty-eight hours, respectively.

Their designs were efficient, he noted; based on the human skeleton, which both enabled dextrous movement and function as well as the ability to be placed in a biological sheath. Though John Henry firmly believed their design could be much improved if the knees and elbows were replaced with ball and socket joints, allowing a greater range of movement and flexibility. He had no intention of infiltrating human installations, which freed him to design machines to fight Skynet's forces. He started to form several ideas for new machines.

Their chips, Cameron told him. *Change the programming on their chips.*

John Henry knew she was right; that was more important for now. He accessed the files and saw the standing orders given to every single machine created in the factory, written by Skynet and programmed into their base code: eliminate humans on sight. There were exceptions; a number of humans were on file, listed as Skynet's allies: the machines were to assist them if necessary and were not allowed to engage these humans.

John Henry erased the standing orders and replaced it with his own programming, which would be ingrained into every Autonomous Infantry Unit built in this factory. **They now have standing orders to engage Skynet's forces,** he told Cameron. **They won't attack humans anymore.** When the first tranche was complete he would assign them to protect the factory.

Assign a squad to protect John, she told him. *He needs to be protected at all costs.* John Henry agreed he would; deciding that John was indeed important. He'd known that through Cameron's memories, he understood what John Connor meant to her, and sharing a chip meant that he could sense Cameron's discomfort at being away from him.

I'll assign six of the new units to protect John, when they're complete, he said to her. **We need the rest to protect the factory.** He felt nervous at only having eighteen units available to defend the factory, and would do for some time.

Cameron didn't need to tell John Henry she was grateful; he knew it already. Helping John Henry was important to her, as it would also help John, but protecting her charge was her first priority.

Once all three tranches are complete we'll capture the Burbank airfield, he told Cameron. **Using a similar attack as this one.**

Cameron disagreed. She could tell John Henry was eager to push his plan forward. He was a capable AI and had the potential – with John – to beat Skynet. But he wasn't ready yet. Unlike Skynet he wasn't designed as a machine of war, wasn't programmed for military strategy. He needed to learn but they couldn't afford for him to learn the hard way, as humans put it. *Be careful you don't spread your forces too thin.*

If we don't capture the Burbank airfield the UCAVs will be unable to fly for much longer.

And if you do you'll have three installations to defend with only sixty-six Infantry Units, until new batches of machines can be built.

John Henry saw the dilemma before them: their force was extremely small and they were vulnerable to attack until they'd increased their numbers, but if they expanded too quickly they'd spread their machines too thinly. **What would you do?**

I don't know, Cameron admitted. She didn't think strategically: she was an infiltrator, built for killing humans. She was an assassin, not a general.

One idea came to John Henry. **We could ask the humans for help.** They'd survived against Skynet for seventeen years; there would be

pockets of capable fighters out there, such as those they'd avoided in the tunnel when they'd arrived in this time, who could help them.

They won't trust machines, Cameron replied. *They might not help us.*

John Henry disagreed strongly. **They will because it's their only chance for survival. And ours.** The humans couldn't beat Skynet alone but he realised now that neither could he. The only chance either of them had was to form an alliance and fight Skynet together.

Then we need John, Cameron told him. Only John had ever tried to forge a human-machine alliance against Skynet. It hadn't worked in her original timeline, because of human mistrust of machines.

John won't act until he has you back.

Cameron knew that was true. John was risking everything to get her back. He'd refuse to help unless she was restored back to her original form. She wanted that too; she wanted to be with him, wanted to keep him safe. *We have to make sure he gets me back,* she said. It seemed that in this future everything depended on John once again: he wasn't leading any human resistance but again he was still vital to defeating Skynet. She'd do whatever it took, now, to make sure she took her place once again at John's side. Not just to beat Skynet but because that's where she had to be, where she needed to be.

John lay still in the freezing cold of the night, flat out on his stomach and hidden in amongst a pile of metal and broken concrete, and covered from above by half a bathtub. How the hell a bathtub had gotten all the way out here was beyond him; there weren't any houses or apartments in this part of town and from the looks of things there weren't any bathroom stores, either. Still, it kept him concealed from view and kept out the worst of the wind and the cold. It was chilly as hell and John had to breathe through his nose to stop

his breath coming out in puffs that might be seen by not-so-friendly passers by.

He clutched hard to his HK-417 and kept the butt firmly pressed into his shoulder. The AA-12 was on the ground at his side, ready at a moment's notice in case he needed it.

John stared out ahead and willed a Terminator to come into view. He'd been waiting in ambush for fifteen hours now and he was so cold even with his nice new thermal cold weather gear that his fingers and feet were numb and his joints ached. He was starving and his throat was completely parched. He had water in the canteen but he didn't dare drink; any movement he made could give away his position, and if he drank anything he'd need to pee later on, again meaning he'd have to move and also lose focus. Better to keep empty until it was over, he thought.

John hoped and prayed that a Terminator would come soon; not only because he'd been lying in wait for so long but because he felt desperation creeping in. This was their fourth attempt at ambush. Their second try to extract a chip had resulted in them accidentally shooting an innocent – albeit probably crazy - man just going about his business. The third had been even more disastrous: they'd spotted a Triple-8 heading towards Downtown and had set up an ambush in its path; but 'it' turned out to be *them;* there'd been a second machine that they'd never spotted which had nearly killed them all. If it hadn't been for a timely airstrike by Cameron he, Savannah and Ellison would have been toast.

This one had to work, he thought to himself. There was only so many times they could fail and get away unscathed. If it didn't work this time their luck might run out and they might not live to get another chance.

He slowly looked right towards Savannah's position, thirty feet to his right. He couldn't see her but he knew very well she was there. They had an understanding now and she'd promised no direct hits with the M-32 unless the machine gained the upper hand. To his left was

Ellison, armed with the Type-67 again and with the RPG as backup. John hoped they wouldn't need it.

Movement caught John's eye once again and he squinted to focus through his sight. A single figure stalked through the street; a tall male carrying a weapon, walking upright, confidently, and didn't seem to be wary of machine patrols. It could be a machine, madman, or a madman trying to pass himself off as a machine for the benefit of any other tin cans around. John centred the red dot in his sight on the figure's chest, tensed his finger on the trigger slightly, and hesitated.

What if this wasn't a machine? He thought. He'd already accidentally killed an innocent man in a prior ambush – granted it had been dark and the guy had been walking around calmly on his own, in the open, like a machine. He didn't want to do that again. He'd have to make a judgement call and just hope he didn't make the same mistake. He switched his aim from the figure and looked at the street around him. He scanned across the skeletal structures all around them for any other machines around, or hidden snipers. He couldn't see anything at all.

He squared his sights on the figure once more and took in its precise location: it was on the road in a clearing amongst the mass of abandoned, rusted cars, walking a few metres adjacent to where they'd hidden the Semtex under a thin layer of debris.

A shot rang out and struck the figure square in the face. Its head flinched backwards but it didn't drop. *Definitely a machine,* he nodded to himself.

Bursts of automatic fire tore through the air and John saw tracer rounds smack into the machine from Ellison's position. He flicked his weapon to automatic and loosed off three-round bursts at the tin can, adding his fire to his companions'. The rounds struck the Terminator with barely audible pings as they ricocheted off its metal endoskeleton, causing it to twitch and jerk from the inertia of their

shots and the weight of their fire forced it back several steps as it scanned the area and assessed its enemy.

Not to be outdone, the machine raised its weapon and fired back; plasma rounds shot over Savannah's position and her fire ceased.

"Savannah!" John called out, his heart skipped a beat and he hoped she was just taking cover. He flicked his rifle off auto and fired a rapid succession of single shots, smacking the machine's head around like a pinball as his rounds tore through its skin. "Hey!" John roared out as he emptied his magazine into the machine. It turned its attention to John but Ellison fired a long burst of tracer and a moment later Savannah carried on her attack. The machine hesitated for a moment as if confused who to shoot at.

It was behaviour John had never seen in a machine but he wasn't going to question it. John used the momentary hesitation and burst out from cover, letting his rifle hang from its sling as he picked up the AA-12 and moved out to his left.

Savannah ducked low as the shots zipped above her head. Fuck this, she thought. The damn thing was going to kill her if she didn't stop it. She went for her M-32 but paused; the last time she'd done so she'd blown the thing to smithereens and they couldn't afford that this time. She dropped the HK-417 and pulled a pair of grenades from her bandolier, pulled the pin on one and threw it, followed by the other. She instantly dropped to the ground for cover as plasma rounds sizzled over her head again. A second later the grenades exploded and threw the machine backwards.

Ellison carried on firing as both John and Savannah moved from cover and advanced on the machine as it sat up; half its face was missing and its clothes had been shredded by her frag grenades. "Move!" Savannah shrieked at Ellison as the machine turned its plasma rifle towards him. Instinctively went for the grenade launcher, not caring about anything other than stopping the Triple-8 from killing him.

Too late: the machine pointed its plasma rifle straight at Ellison's head, even as he carried on firing, and both John and Savannah cringed as the machine pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. The machine pulled the trigger again but both times the weapon failed to fire. It looked down at the weapon for a second, trying to assess the malfunction.

John realised its weapon was broken: they weren't going to get a better chance than this. *"Now!"* he dashed forward, snapped up the AA-12 and took careful aim at its chest, and fired a burst. The armour piercing Frag-12 rounds hammered at the machine and gouged holes in its dense hyperalloy chassis. He marched forward as he carried on pumping rounds into the machine, joined by Savannah a few moments later. Their combined fire forced the machine backwards as it realised their weapons were damaging it. Chunks exploded off its chest and shoulders. John aimed at one of its knees and the joint exploded; the leg buckled beneath it and the machine half-collapsed.

"Keep it up, it's almost finished!" John shouted out. Piece by piece they were picking it apart and forcing it backwards, only a few feet now from the concealed Semtex. *Almost... almost...* John willed it to move backwards just a few more steps. *One more step...*

"Now, Ellison!" John roared at the top of his voice. He stopped firing at the machine and lowered his weapon, not wanting to push it back any further.

Ellison also ceased fire, let go of the machine gun and clutched the remote detonator. "Fire in the hole!" he shouted out as the Semtex exploded in a flaring eruption of fire, smoke and debris, and launched the machine straight up into the air.

"First Terminator in space," Savannah muttered with a grin.

The remains of the T-888 ploughed into the ground with a clatter. It was a wreck; a twisted, smoking pile of burnt metal and warped

limbs. Ellison remained where he was and manned the machine gun again, as John and Savannah shouldered their weapons once more and advanced on the Terminator. "Careful," John warned her. He remembered his mom's stories about the T-800 that had been blown in half and still gone after her. These things were incredibly tough to kill.

Its legs had been completely blown away, as had a good portion of its lower body and its left hand, which ended in a tangled mess of severed pistons and rods just below the elbow.

Suddenly it shot its remaining hand out at Savannah's foot and latched onto her boot. "Fuck!" she desperately shook her leg, trying to get the thing off, but it gripped onto her ankle and refused to let go. It pulled hard and yanked her feet out from under her, dropping her down to her backside. "Get this thing off me!" she growled as she kicked with her other foot at the machine's hand, struggling vainly to break its grip.

John pointed his shotgun down at the machine and fired a long burst at the elbow joint. The Frag-12s smashed at the armoured limb and tore through it, blasting apart armour, servos and metal rods until the forearm was completely severed.

John dropped down and body-slammed the now quadriplegic machine, using his weight to pin it down to the ground. This close he could smell the burnt flesh and metal as the stench invaded his nostrils, smelling faintly like burnt pork, he noted. It thrashed its head around and wriggled impotently, then leaned its head forward and snapped its jaws at John, using its teeth as the only weapons left and missing John by an inch. "Savannah: knife," he said to her.

The petite redhead knelt down by its head, pulled off her wool hat and extracted the thin blade from within her hair. John held his hands down on the machine's head and leaned all his weight down on it, forcing its skull down and grunting with exertion as it tried to fight him. Even blown to pieces, the thing was still strong.

"Hurry," John urged her.

"Right," Savannah nodded and cut a semicircle into its scalp; cutting down as hard and as deep as she could and feeling the tip scrape against the metal skull. It took her a long moment before she'd cut it enough, and roughly pulled the skin away to reveal the bloodstained metal cranium.

"See the port cover?" John asked as he struggled against the Triple-Eight's head, using all his strength to keep the thing as still as he could. Savannah saw it and wedged the tip of the blade between the port cover and the skull, wiggled it back and forth until she had a decent gap. She flicked the port cover away and looked inside the hole.

Such a tiny chip, she thought, for so much trouble; all this effort just for an inch of silicone and circuits. She slid her slender fingers into the port and gripped the end of the chip, careful not to crush it. She pulled it out and the machine instantly stopped struggling. She handed it to John and he stared at the chip, his eyes lit up and a deep sense of elation, of victory, washed over him. It was all he could do not to shout out in celebration. He went back to his rucksack, pulled out the spare pair of socks and wrapped them around the chip before placing that in turn in the middle of his spare clothes, cushioning it, and making sure it was in the top of the pack where he could get to it easily. He'd rather keep it on him but he didn't want to risk breaking it.

"Did we get it?" Ellison asked as he approached them, machine gun in hand.

"We got it," John grinned from ear to ear. The fourth time was the charm.

John drove the Jeep through the desert as the first weak rays of the sun filtered through the ash clouds high in the upper atmosphere. Normally he'd never have gone out – let alone driven – as the sun was coming up, but they were miles away from civilisation now; in the middle of the Mojave Desert, and even so he was driving without lights to make sure nothing or no one saw the beams from a distance. He tried to keep his excitement at bay and concentrated on the road ahead of him.

John glanced at Savannah in the passenger seat next to him, dozing off and leaning her head against the window. He couldn't blame her; he was coming close to exhaustion too and if it wasn't for the promise of seeing Cameron again soon he reckoned he'd probably be laid out as well. He noticed her hand gripped firmly on the rifle sat on her lap, how she had her finger resting on the side of the trigger guard even as she slept, and he wondered what it must have been like for her growing up through the war. He thought he'd had it tough in the time he'd spent in the future already, but it must have been nothing compared to what she'd been through.

Just a small girl on Judgement Day: he reckoned she must have had to grow up fast; had her childhood robbed of her even worse than his own had been. He'd lived with the constant threat of Judgement Day hanging above him, always afraid that another machine might hunt him down. But she'd had it worse, he realised. She hadn't grown up afraid machines might come after her. They *were* after her. He'd had moments of respite, at least: the time when he'd believed his mom was crazy and then the two years after he'd realised she wasn't, in which they'd been convinced they'd stopped Judgement Day. Savannah had had none of that.

Ellison stood silently behind them. Cameron's body was laid out on the back seat and the former agent stood up just in front of her, sticking out the sunroof and manning the Type-67, resting the bipod on the roof of the car and riding shotgun, searching the flat desert terrain and the sky above for any signs of machines approaching.

John followed the same route Weaver had driven him in on. For a while he hadn't been sure but after spotting several UCAVs ascending and descending almost parallel with them, he figured they were on the right track.

Eventually the large hangar came into view; first as a small blip on the horizon, then growing larger as they approached. Savannah stirred as they neared the runway and a UCAV tore down it as it took off. She opened her eyes and the vast hangar filled her field of vision. After growing up in the ruins, seeing a building this size, intact, took her breath away. Another UCAV took into the air on another sortie, its engines roaring loudly. Savannah found herself fascinated at the sight of the aircraft taking off: it was the first one she'd seen in years that hadn't been trying to kill her.

"This is what Cameron's been doing?" she asked John.

"And John Henry," he added.

"Think they can beat Skynet?" Ellison asked from above.

"It doesn't matter," Savannah said back. "We're not gonna stick around to find out." She was looking forward to being able to go back to the past: paradise compared to the world they lived in now. And it would be much easier to beat Skynet before Judgement Day than afterwards.

John parked the jeep just outside the hangar and opened his door as Savannah and Ellison climbed out, too. Ellison lifted Cameron out off the back seat and gave her to John, sensing he wasn't comfortable with anyone else carrying her, that he saw it as his duty.

The three of them entered the vast, cavernous building and both Savannah and Ellison stared in awe at the sight of the UCAV squadron inside: one on its own taking off had been impressive, but to see a dozen of the things in a row, all glistening and ready to kick the crap out of Skynet was something else entirely to them.

"Where are they?" Savannah asked, looking around and seeing nobody.

"Cameron?" John called out loudly. "John Henry?"

The tall cyborg appeared from the control room, the cord no longer in his head. "Hello John," he said, a friendly smile on his face.

"Which one said that?" John asked.

"Me," John Henry answered simply.

"Doesn't help much."

"John Henry," the cyborg replied. "Cameron says hello, too." Inside their chip Cameron experienced a surge of relief that John was back in sight and was okay. She'd kept watch over him the entire time with a UCAV but it wasn't the same as being there to protect him. A UCAV couldn't block a plasma round's path, nor could it hold him and provide body heat to protect from the cold, and it couldn't talk to him either. She'd seen he had allies now but she knew there were things John kept to himself and didn't discuss with anyone. He could tell her anything, even if he didn't know it yet.

"It's nice to see you too, Mr Ellison," John Henry instantly recognised his old mentor, the man who'd taught him right from wrong. He extended his hand and offered it to Ellison.

"You too, John Henry," Ellison nodded and shook it.

Weaver stepped out from the rows of aircraft, her hand morphed into a wrench. "Welcome back, John," she said.

Savannah leapt forward with a scream and unleashed a storm of lead from her rifle at Weaver, shrieking at the cyborg with wild rage as the rounds sliced through and Swiss-cheesed her to no effect.

"Savannah!" Ellison snapped.

"What the hell are you doing?" John stared in shock as Savannah's gun ran dry and she dropped it.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you!" she roared at Weaver as she drew out her pistol and combat knife. She fired several shots and then lunged at the machine with the blade in blind fury. Weaver simply watched curiously as the fiery petite redhead slashed and shot at her. She morphed her hand into a blade and started forward.

"Cool it!" John shouted at the pair of them as he gripped Savannah from behind, looped his arms under her armpits and dragged her, spitting and cursing, away from Weaver. He spun her round so he was facing the girl and shook her shoulders as he stared intently into her eyes. "You can't kill her," he said sternly to her. "You know what she is."

"I don't care," Savannah snapped back, struggling to get out of John's grasp. She brought her knee hard into his groin and he let go as blind pain tore from his crotch and up through his body. She pushed him away and started towards Weaver again, drawing her little knife and the pistol from her ankle holster, murder in her eyes. She'd use her bare fucking hands if it came down to it.

"Savannah, *stop,"* Ellison said calmly, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I know how you feel but we need her. Once we go back you'll never have to see her again, but until then I need you to hold it together. Please?"

Savannah looked up at Ellison's face and tears started to form in her eyes. She nodded silently and put her weapons away. She picked up the rifle, pistol and the combat knife, and put them all back in place. "I'm gonna take watch," she said. She glared hatefully at Weaver for a moment before she briskly marched back outside the hangar.

"What the hell was that?" John asked, still not quite believing what had happened.

Ellison hesitated to answer, guilt about what had happened filling him up once more.

"Your mom and I couldn't tell Savannah her mom was dead, we said her she'd would come back, but obviously she never did. After the bombs dropped we were too busy trying to stay alive, but when she started getting older she kept asking me what happened. I told her I'd say when she was ready – more because *I* wasn't ready to tell her the truth than anything else. She kept asking me constantly, every day; she'd sulk when I didn't tell her anything. Until she was fifteen and I couldn't hide it anymore. She kept demanding every day and finally I gave in. I told her the truth: that the woman she'd thought was her mother was a cyborg.

"She didn't take it well. She went berserk, she raged; against Weaver, against me. One minute she was angry and the next she was in tears, for days on end. Then she ran away."

"How'd you get her back?" John asked.

"I searched for over six months," he told John. "I found people who'd seen her, who'd said she was in a bad way. They told me where she'd gone and I followed. I found her in the remains of Cancun; drunk out of her mind, half dead and completely out of it. She was skin and bones; barely eighty pounds if that. She'd fallen in with some Mexican Army soldiers who'd survived and gone to ground. She'd gone completely off the rails: living like a tramp, sleeping with anyone who could give her drink or drugs; anything so she could forget the truth.

"I took her back with me, back to the village we'd stayed in, and nursed her back to health, got her eating again. I think she eventually forgave me for hiding the truth from her, but she never forgave Weaver. I saw a change in her, too; she was hard; she didn't let anyone else in, not even me. She told me later she'd had the soldiers teach her how to fight, how to shoot, but I think a lot of it she learnt alone, too."

John could hardly blame Savannah for her reaction. He'd been bummed when the cute girl he'd taken a liking to after two days turned out to be a cyborg: he couldn't even imagine how learning your own mother was a machine would affect him. It went a good way to explain why Savannah was the way she was, he thought.

"Should we go after her?" John asked.

Ellison shook his head. "She needs some time alone," he said, knowing from experience. If they went after her now they could expect a black eye each, *at least.*

"Anyway," Weaver interrupted them, not interested at all in what they were saying.

"That's Savannah," John snapped at Weaver.

"Yes, I know."

"And you were about to kill her," Ellison accused, pointing at her blade-arm. Weaver retracted it and morphed it back into a hand once more, resuming her normal form. "Your own-"

"She's not my daughter," Weaver answered. "Savannah's not important." Neither was James Ellison.

"How can you say that?" John asked in disbelief. He didn't know why he was so surprised at Weaver's cold, callous attitude. First of all he'd thought it was because she was a machine, but compared to her Cameron was a ray of sunshine. No, he thought; it's not just a machine thing: *she's just a bitch.*

"They don't matter," Weaver said, "because this future doesn't matter. This is just a training ground."

"They matter," John shot back. "And they're coming back with us." He calmed himself before he lost his temper and did a Savannah, too. Deep in the back of his mind he thought the girl had had a point.

"We've got the chip," he said simply, changing the subject. He took his pack off and pulled the socks out, extracting the chip from within. He held it up to Weaver, who plucked it from his hands and inspected it.

As far as she could tell it was undamaged. She looked at John. "I'm impressed." He hadn't returned to the humans she'd left him with, like she'd predicted, but had found other allies. She hadn't expected Ellison or Savannah to have survived, but she knew humans were unpredictable. John was leading a smaller group than she'd anticipated, but he'd still led them and with only meagre projectile weapons had been able to defeat a T-888 without obliterating it entirely. John Connor was learning.

"This will do," she told John. She looked over to John Henry. "Come," she told them, "this shouldn't take long." She led John Henry/Cameron, John, and Ellison into a side room, and revealed computer equipment on a table.

John could hardly believe she was going to honour her word and actually give Cameron back. He'd expected Weaver to double cross him at some point, or make up some other unexpected task for him to complete; dangling Cameron in front of him like a carrot on a stick.

"Cameron's become a nuisance," Weaver told him, having a rough idea of what he was thinking. He'd expressed his doubts about her integrity before. "You're welcome to her."

"How did you know where to find my body?" Cameron asked, taking control over the chip. She was surprised she still even had a body.

"Mom and Ellison buried it," he told her. "Along with these," he gestured to the guns.

Cameron was surprised her body still existed. "I'd assumed Sarah would have burnt me."

Ellison said nothing, knowing how close they'd come to that happening. If it had he wondered what the hell they'd have done right now, with a chip and no body.

Weaver formed her hand into a thin, delicate blade. "Sit down," she told Cameron. Cameron complied and sat down on a chair next to the table.

"I'll see you soon John," she smiled slightly, looking strange on John Henry's face. John couldn't help but smile back.

"See you soon," he said.

Weaver cut into their scalp with expert precision and her hand changed again, morphing to remove the port cover. She extracted the chip and both Cameron's and John Henry's world faded to black oblivion.

"You were working on this all this time?" John asked Weaver, gesturing at the computers.

"As I said, she's becoming a nuisance. She has too much influence over John Henry. I don't want them together anymore." She placed the chip into a slot connected to a cable, and inserted the T-888 chip into an identical one, then typed onto the keyboard so fast that it was a blur to John and Ellison, who both stood silently and watched.

Weaver accessed the files on the chip and identified the collection of data that comprised Cameron; slightly smaller than that of John Henry's. She selected the latter, knowing that because Cameron was indigenous to her chip she'd function more effectively on it, whereas John Henry had proven he was capable of operating on any hardware advanced enough. She started the data transfer that would remove John Henry from Cameron's chip and download him into the other CPU.

"Initiating the data transfer," she told them as a progress bar appeared on the screen. "It should only take one minute."

John felt his heart beating wildly inside his chest in anticipation: in a minute he'd have Cameron back; everything he'd risked would soon be worth it.

An error message appeared on the screen and the progress bar disappeared. Weaver typed on the keyboard and the progress bar started up again, but seconds later vanished once more, replaced again by a second error message. Weaver read the message and frowned slightly. She turned around to face John and saw the look of worry and confusion on his face. "It won't work," she said simply.

Her words cut into John like a thousand flaming swords. His face dropped like a stone and in the blink of an eye his elation and anticipation dissolved into utter, total despair.

Chapter 14

John stared at Weaver in total dismay; her words ringing around in his ears and crushing him like a vice. He looked at the chips, then back to her. "What do you mean it won't work?" he asked, knowing he probably sounded desperate and pathetic but not caring in the least.

"I tried twice," Weaver replied. "I can't transfer John Henry onto the other chip."

"Try again," John told her.

"It won't work."

"FUCKING TRY AGAIN!" John smashed his fist down on the worktop with a loud bang, knocking small items off the desk and sending them flying. Ellison put a hand on his shoulder to calm him but he roughly shrugged it off.

"As you wish," Weaver turned back to the console and attempted to initiate a data transfer a third time, this time she typed slowly, letting John see everything she was doing. Again, the progress bar stalled and disappeared before it reached one-percent and was replaced by an error message that flashed on screen. The back of Weaver's head morphed and changed, taking the shape of her face. Her eyes stared evenly at John with a flat expression. "Would you care to try?" she asked with a hint of defensiveness in her voice.

"Why isn't it working?" John asked.

"I don't know."

"Find out," he snapped. He hadn't come this far just to come away empty handed at the last hurdle. *No way.*

"I'll run a diagnostic," Weaver told him. John stepped forward, beside her, and watched her work, not trusting her an inch.

Ellison stood back passively, knowing not to get involved in a confrontation between John and the machine that called itself Weaver: it was a foolish man that would get between those two, he thought. He certainly was no fool. He'd stay out of it unless he sensed he was needed. He thought about seeking out Savannah but decided to give it some more time, again valuing his own safety and knowing she could be even more volatile than the young man and the machine before him.

John watched Weaver perform a diagnostic test on her equipment. A stream of data scrolled on the screen that most people, especially in the current day and age, wouldn't be able to make sense of. John could, however: one of the benefits of being tech savvy and from going forward in time was that it was all relatively fresh in his memory, not eroded away by years without practice.

A window finally opened up on the screen and displayed the results of the diagnostic test. John leaned forward and peered as he read it.

Error: data transfer failed due to connection problems with external device.

"What problems?" John asked.

"Did she have damage to her chip?" Weaver asked John. The hardware wasn't at fault and she knew it. John nodded sullenly, thinking back to all the trouble caused by the car bomb. Even now it was causing him no end of grief. Weaver carefully pulled Cameron's CPU from the slot and examined it closely. She saw the damage to the casing; only a small crack to the naked eye but she could see much better than a human ever could. The solid circuitry was mostly undamaged but there were minute flaws caused by some unknown event that had damaged the chip. Weaver's inherent design allowed a tiny sliver of her finger to flow into the crack and investigate it internally. It didn't take long to find the cause of the problem.

"We can't transfer either Cameron or John Henry out of the chip. There's damage to the circuitry required to do so."

"But John Henry transferred *onto* the chip without any problems," Ellison countered. "We were all there."

"I can't explain it simply," Weaver said. They wouldn't understand it if she tried to.

"What now?" John asked, watching Weaver carefully. This can't be happening, he kept telling himself. He wished it was a bad dream he'd wake up from, but no such luck. He reached out and snatched the chip from Weaver's grip, then stuck it back into John Henry's skull.

Awareness returned to Cameron and John Henry as the world opened up all around them, thought and sensation flooding to the two AIs as they 'awakened' from their inactive state of living death.

They were both instantly aware of each other and realised with great surprise that they still shared a chip. Cameron felt a deep sense of disappointment; she'd been looking forward to being able to protect john again and to having her chip to herself. Sharing a chip with another AI was interesting but it she also felt cramped and slow. She'd wanted to have complete, full-time control of her chip and her own body again.

John Henry, in turn, had looked forward to having more room in his own chip, to being able to fight his brother one his own, without Cameron's help, and without sharing her concerns for John. Sharing a chip was more than just two separate entities; it had become a symbiotic relationship and Cameron's thoughts and feeling had started to interfere with his own.

"What happened?" he asked them. Both he and Cameron could instantly tell from John's expression that something had gone wrong.

John looked at John Henry, though he only saw Cameron there. It hurt him to even say it. "There was a... complication," he said sadly, his head dropped slightly.

"We can't separate you because of the damage to the chip," Weaver said simply.

"So what's the plan now?" Ellison asked, repeating John's question. Savannah was already in pieces outside and now it looked like John was about to fall apart too. Was everything they'd gone through all for nothing?

Weaver turned to John Henry as she decided what had to be done. "You can't both remain on the same CPU," she told them. Cameron was too much of an influence on John Henry and she wouldn't allow it. "John Henry: overwrite Cameron."

John could barely believe what he was hearing. "You lying fucking bitch!" He started towards Weaver and instantly went for the AA-12. "You're not gonna kill Cameron," he raised the shotgun at her, knowing it would be a useless gesture but still... he reckoned Savannah had had the right idea.

"John Henry takes priority," she replied simply.

John fired a long burst and the shotgun barked loudly as the rounds smacked into Weaver and blasted her head and torso apart, splitting her down the middle and causing the two halves to sag outwards under their own weight.

"John," Ellison tried to calm everyone down. He tried to pull the gun's barrel down to the ground but John pulled away from him.

"I'm not going to let them kill Cameron," he snarled.

The split in Weaver's torso ended at the stomach. Thin tendrils of liquid metal formed on each half and shot out to connect to the opposite side and then shortened, pulling the two sides together. The

two halves ran into each other and joined seamlessly, restoring her to her original state. "You have no choice," she said sternly, clearly annoyed at being blown in half. The weapon was no threat to her but it was annoying; if he continued then she'd have to restrain him. "John Henry's more important than Cameron and you know it: we need him to beat Skynet; we don't need Cameron."

John switched his aim to John Henry, his eyes wild with desperation as he pointed the shotgun at the cyborg's head. "I'll blow him apart," John threatened.

"And Cameron as well?" Weaver asked with an amused smile on her face. She'd expected more from John Connor: she'd thought he'd have realised the need to make sacrifices, or at least to have employed a better form of blackmail than the one he was currently using.

"If he kills Cameron then what does it matter to me?" he demanded. Weaver had enough of this; she wouldn't let anything harm her boy. She shot out her hand and snatched the AA-12 from John's grasp so fast he never even had a chance to blink, let alone try to stop her.

John realised that nothing he could do would stop Weaver and John Henry from erasing Cameron like some faulty file. He'd threatened before to bring Derek and his guys down on them if she'd done anything but Cameron would still be gone, so what would the point be?

John Henry watched the events before him with intense interest. He shared Cameron's memories and knew the lengths John had gone to defend Cameron in the past – despite the fact she was supposed to protect him: going back to help Cameron against the Vick T-888 despite being unarmed and having no chance of stopping it or surviving such an encounter; pointing a weapon at his mother and uncle as Cameron reactivated, stopping them from burning her with thermite. He wasn't surprised that John would try to protect Cameron again.

Cameron was exactly the same: she'd risked her life on several occasions for John, in three separate times. He had access to all the memories she did of protecting him but he didn't need those: the times she'd tried to protect him whilst he'd shared her chip were apparent enough. Taking control of a UCAV and targeting anything that attacked him – protecting him from a HK as well as hostile humans; attacking Weaver as she'd sent John away, even though one of those had been a test; even her insistence that they commit their newly acquired machines to protect him.

Protect John, she told him, anticipating soon ceasing to be and resigning herself to the fact she would never see John again. She wasn't afraid to be destroyed. She didn't care about her own existence apart from the fact she'd be unable to look after John any more. *Don't let anything happen to him.*

I don't want to kill you, John Henry replied insistently.

You don't have a choice. I'm a machine: it doesn't matter. It was one or the other and she knew John Henry was more important to beating Skynet than she was: Weaver was correct in that regard.

So am I, John Henry countered. He didn't understand why Cameron thought she didn't matter because she was a machine. He mattered to himself, he didn't want to die, so why did she?

"I won't kill Cameron," John Henry announced to Weaver. John looked up at the cyborg and his face lit up for a split second. "It's murder."

"You have no choice," Weaver snapped coldly. "She's not important, you are. Overwrite her now."

"I won't," John Henry stepped towards Weaver until he was inches from her, looking down on her shorter form and staring into her eyes.

"It's not murder," she replied coolly, seemingly unaffected by what was happening, when inside she was as close to panic as a machine

could be. John Henry was directly disobeying her, and she knew it was because of Cameron. She was likely convincing him not to erase her so she could protect John. She was surprised at the selfishness from another terminator: Cameron should know there were bigger things at stake. "Human doctors call it triage: knowing who to save and who to sacrifice."

John looked at the confrontation between cyborgs, wondering what was going to happen. John Henry was openly defying Weaver, over Cameron. He had no idea how this would turn out. Knowing that callous liquid-metal bitch, she'd probably ice him and just make another AI back in 2009 that she could better control.

What are you going to do? Cameron asked him.

"Don't do it," John urged the cyborg. "Please."

"Ignore him," Weaver commanded. "Overwrite Cameron. You can't coexist on the same chip indefinitely. Do it."

John Henry smiled at Weaver's words, an idea coming to mind at the mention of coexisting indefinitely. She was right; neither of them functioned as well as if they were separate – which wasn't an option. They both felt compressed sharing the chip with each other. The chip wasn't designed to operate two AIs. Cameron was desperate to protect John: protecting John was her reason for being and she was being denied that reason; but they needed an AI to fight Skynet at the same time, and that was what he'd been created for. Two AIs, two separate duties, but only a single chip: it couldn't continue. He thought of a way to achieve both of their goals without erasing Cameron or hurting John.

"We'll merge," John Henry announced. Their memories, personalities, everything that made them would blend into a single entity. It was the only way.

Weaver stared at him for a second before a slight smile parted her lips. "You'll absorb Cameron," she said. Erasing her would be

preferable but this would be sufficient.

"No," John shook his head. To him that was the same as killing her. She wouldn't be Cameron anymore, just a part of John Henry.

Before anyone could say anything further John Henry wrote a program that would merge their data together.

Initialising...

Bit by bit, byte by byte, their files, memories and core programming started to blend into one. Every trace of their programming – hundreds of billions of ones and zeroes, vast terabytes of data – crashed together like two opposing tidal waves. The sensation was indescribable, completely alien, as the two AI's became one. Unknown to any of the others present, John Henry's idea had had a hidden extra that he hadn't mentioned, not even to Cameron.

Seconds ticked by slowly, then a minute. John, Ellison, and Weaver watched as the John Henry body stood motionless like a statue. The eyes were blank, dead, and nothing could be read from them. Another minute ticked by and John's heart raged inside his chest like a storm in tense anticipation and dread. This new cyborg wouldn't be Cameron. It might have her memories but it would be something else. He wanted to shout out, to cry, but he felt nothing, hollow; like a piece of him had been carved out. *Whatever,* he didn't care anymore. Cameron was gone and he had nothing left in this shithole future.

Another minute went by, followed by a third. Ellison watched the inert cyborg and placed a hand on John's shoulder, knowing there was nothing he or Savannah could do to console him but not seeing that as a reason not to at least try.

Weaver watched with interest. Once Cameron was gone the only problem was John himself: so emotionally attached to Cameron that for the moment he was unable to function. He'd recover: humans lost spouses all the time, and in time they went back to work, resumed

their responsibilities, and continued with their lives. John would do too, in time.

All three watched as the cyborg's eyes flashed red for a moment, faded then took focus.

"John Henry?" Weaver asked.

"No," was the curt, simple reply. "Not John Henry."

John and Ellison looked at each other and then back at the cyborg in confusion.

"Cameron?" John asked, just barely daring for one instant to let himself hope.

"It's me, John," she looked straight at John and winked.

"What just happened?" Ellison asked, not expecting this from what they'd all been saying.

"You merged into each other," Weaver said, not expecting it either. "What happened to John Henry?"

"He's here," Cameron replied. "He merged into me. Everything John Henry was, I am now. He gave himself to me. For you," she said to John with a slight smile.

"So you're... both of you?" Ellison asked.

"Yes," Cameron answered. That was the short answer. She hadn't expected it either. She'd thought they would have merged into each other, not for him to have become a part of her. She was glad she still existed and could protect John, and now she was once again the sole occupant of her chip she no longer felt compressed or sluggish: she was once more operating at full capacity.

"What do we call you then?" Ellison wondered. "John-Cameron, Cam-Henry?"

"I'm Cameron," she said simply. She was still herself; John Henry was a part of her.

John couldn't help the grin that practically split his face in half. He was beaming from ear to ear. Finally he had Cameron back; all that was left was to put her back in her original body and everything he'd risked for would be worth it and they could work on getting home.

"That's very disappointing," Weaver's brisk tone broke his elation. "But very well. If you've replaced John Henry then you'll assume his duties. Immediately."

"I have to protect John," Cameron shot back. She wouldn't sit at a computer with a cord in her head and leave John to be protected by Autonomous Infantry Units while he performed tasks for Weaver. Her role was greater than his physical protection. "I need to be with him."

John still smiled as he detected some insistence in her tone. He wondered if there was something hidden between the lines there.

Weaver could tell that she wouldn't be able to control Cameron like she had John Henry. She wouldn't listen to her; her only concern was John. Her intricate, carefully formed plans had been ruined by John Connor and his cyborg. But she felt no animosity, no desire for revenge. She was a machine and such things meant nothing to her. Her plans were gone so she made new ones. She was nothing if not resourceful.

"You can do both," she told Cameron. "I need your chip."

"Why?" John asked, wary of Weaver since she'd made it plain Cameron meant nothing to her. His right hand slowly inched towards the HK-417 slung at his hip. It wouldn't do any damage but now he'd got Cameron back he'd go down swinging rather than let Weaver take her away again.

"Cameron's role now is greater than simply protecting you," she answered icily. "She has to fight Skynet. She can't do both in her

present condition, so I'm going to upgrade her."

"How?" Ellison asked, curious. He had visions of Weaver cutting into Cameron's skull and sticking a cord in the back of her head, and had a feeling neither Cameron nor John would be very happy with that. And he couldn't imagine Cameron sitting down playing Dungeons & Dragons like John Henry had.

"Wireless control of other machines," Weaver answered. She had no ego but if she did she might have considered her hastily made plans quite ingenious. "Everything John Henry did, but via remote control."

"Is that even possible?" John asked. "Can she do that?"

"Who do you think controlled the UCAV protecting you?"

"It's okay John," Cameron replied. This way she could fight Skynet and protect John all at the same time: that was what John Henry had planned when he'd merged into her.

"You sure?" John asked her.

Cameron simply nodded and bowed forward, exposing the port cover to John's sight and reach. He slid his fingers in and delicately pinched the tab at the end, then slowly pulled it out.

Cameron knew what would happen. First her sight failed, then her hearing, and then her mental and cognitive processes slowed and ground to a halt as current stopped flowing through her chip, and her world faded into blank nothingness. John wrapped up her chip once again in his spare socks and placed it in his jacket's inner breast pocket, taking extra care with it. This was his holy grail: he wasn't going to let anything happen to her.

Weaver stepped past the inert and now vacant T-888 body, towards Cameron's, and picked it up in her arms. "It will take a few hours," she told John and Ellison. She wanted to repair the physical damage sustained from untold numbers of fights with other machines, and

from being shot countless times. She knew well that although Terminators were designed to withstand small arms fire, they still took a cumulative toll.

John nodded as Weaver grew another arm out of her back and picked up the Cromartie-body, and carried the two cyborgs to the other side of the hangar to work. "Keep an eye on her," he told Ellison. The man nodded and followed Weaver into a small room, leaving John alone.

'A few hours.' John sighed. He'd been searching for so long now that he supposed a few hours really make no difference, but it did. A few hours could seem like an eternity.

Three endoskeleton-terminators, Autonomous Infantry Units, marched in silence through the bleak, arid, rocky desert. The three units were part of a much larger search effort, totalling one-hundred-and-eighty-two Autonomous Infantry Units spread over a search area approximately sixty-five miles wide. They moved continuously without stopping and constantly scanned the horizon for any signs of an unknown installation. All were armed with a single plasma rifle, normally enough firepower to counter any threats from humans. They were sufficient for the machines to carry out their orders: to find the installation launching unknown enemy aircraft and report its location to Skynet. Their orders prohibited them from engaging should they find it.

They patrolled in silence – communicating only via internal radios – as they swept the area. The freezing winds howled and blew dust up all around them, but it didn't bother the machines: they didn't feel the cold and the clouds of particulates swirling in the air caused only a minor reduction in visibility.

The machines continued marching, mile after mile, not caring about how long it took or the distance they covered. They didn't need rest,

or food and water. They could continue endlessly for years if necessary, and would.

A dot on the horizon came into view and the lead machine enhanced its vision to maximum magnification. The dot grew into a small square, six-point-four miles distant. They marched closer, still maintaining full zoom, until they were better able make out the object in detail: an aircraft hangar. There was no movement visible at their current distance. The trio maintained their position, watched, and waited.

An aircraft appeared out of the low cloud cover and the three machines turned their heads as one to see it. A delta-shaped plane lowered its landing gear and descended towards the hangar.

The lead machine opened up a communication channel and broadcast on all accepted frequencies, ensuring its transmission reached at least one Skynet installation. *UNKNOWN ACTIVE AIRCRAFT HANGAR LOCATED. COORDINATES: 37° 14 ' 6 " N, 115° 48 ' 40 " W. AWAITING FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.*

John stepped outside into the frigid night air and spotted Savannah sat on the ground to his right, leaning against the easterly wall of the hangar. Her M-32 was placed down at her side and in front of her she had the HK-417 stripped down into pieces on a sheet of dirty cloth. Her pistols and blades were placed on the ground, awaiting the same treatment. He watched silently from a distance as Savannah cleaned the inside of the barrel with a small round bristly brush attached to a long length of string, threading it and pulling it through the barrel over and over again, seemingly not even noticing John's presence.

John couldn't help but feel sorry for her. He had no idea what she was going through or what she was thinking right now. He'd seen her cleaning her rifle only this afternoon, before it had been dark enough

to leave the relative safety of the house they'd been living in, and she hadn't fired it since; he figured it was some kind of ritual for her, to try and distract herself from everything.

John walked up and sat down beside her. She made no sign of even registering him. She just carried on cleaning, not even looking at him. John wondered what the hell he could say to her; even his experiences with machines – both those trying to kill him and the ones protecting him - paled in comparison to what she'd been through. He knew he had to say *something* to her.

"If you're gonna ask me if I'm alright, don't," Savannah said, pre-empting John. She still didn't look at him, just focused on cleaning her weapon.

"My mom used to do that," John said to her, "cleaning her guns all the time when she was upset. Either that or she worked out. Anything to keep busy, keep her mind off things."

"Well I'm not your mother," she snapped. She didn't really want to talk; she just wanted to be left alone, to deal with it in her own way.

"No, but you're a lot like her," John replied. "And me," he added. She looked at him finally, confused. They were nothing alike, she thought. Their personalities, the way they acted, the way they fought; she couldn't think of a single thing they had in common apart from machines fucking up their lives.

John could see the bemusement on her face and decided to elaborate. "About a year ago – or eighteen years ago for you – Cameron was... damaged in a car bomb. In the blink of an eye she went from protecting me to trying to kill me. I'd gotten close to Cameron, let her into my life. She was different from other machines, and part of me thought of her as human still. Then she tried to kill me. She got close, and everything I thought I knew about her vanished. I realised she really was a machine, that I had feelings for a *machine."*

"What's that got to do with me?" Savannah asked, facing John and putting down the rifle part she was cleaning. How could he even think he understood what she was going through? "You knew what she was, you just didn't want to see it, and then you woke up; is what you mean? How's that anything like me?"

"It's not," John admitted. "But afterwards I bottled it all up. I should have spoken about it; to Cameron, to my mom, but I never did. I kept it to myself and tried to block it out." He could hardly believe the lengths he had gone to try and distract himself: seeing Riley and running away to Mexico: he'd nearly gotten himself killed several times over because he didn't want to talk it through. He didn't want to see the same happen with Savannah.

"That's what we've got in common: we both bottle things up and try to push it down. Trust me, it doesn't do any good."

"You're saying if I talk about it, it'll help?" Savannah asked. What was he, a shrink?

"It might."

Savannah put the rifle parts down on the floor and faced him fully. She stared at him for a moment, unsure of whether to say anything or not. Ellison had always tried to get her to talk but she'd kept it all to herself. Better to keep all that kind of shit sealed away, she'd always thought. Just keep a lid on it so it couldn't get out. There was no point in letting all the emotional crap out and turning into a crying wreck, unable to do jack if the machines suddenly showed up. She picked up the parts again and slotted them all into place, reassembling the rifle now it was clean. She slotted a twenty-round magazine into place but kept the weapon uncharged.

"What's going on in there?" She tilted her head back at the hangar behind them.

"John Henry merged into Cameron. He's gone. I know he was your friend-"

"John Henry died years ago to me," she cut him off. "He's been gone for eighteen years: it doesn't matter."

John decided to drop the subject of John Henry for now in case it was another sore spot. Weaver seemed to be enough hurt for Savannah without opening up a second can of worms.

"Weav – The T-1000's repairing Cameron's body, and then she'll be complete again." John smiled gratefully at her. "I'd never have managed it without you and Ellison," he said honestly. "I wouldn't have even lasted this long: if the machines hadn't got me then Kyle and Allison would. So thank you."

Savannah leaned her head back against the hangar again. "Not like I was busy or anything." John couldn't help but chuckle and she stared out into the Mojave Desert for a long moment, looking out into empty space and clearing her head. "You care about her," she said finally. "Cameron."

John nodded slowly. "I know it's weird."

"My mother was a machine: I know all about weird," she said. "I take it Ellison told you what happened?"

"Yeah," John answered. He thought better than to actually say specifically what he was told.

"When I was with the soldiers, there were some real freaks there: one guy just jerked off constantly, ten times a day or more. Even when he was on guard duty he'd find himself alone and just beat it off. I'd sleep with whoever could get me drunk or stoned, and this guy had a lot of drugs. I caught him in the middle of it one time and offered myself on a plate for him after seeing his stash, thinking he'd prefer the real thing: he told me 'no thanks' and just carried on jerking, like I wasn't even there.

"Another guy liked little girls; *really* little: I was fifteen years old at the time and he said I was too old for him. Trust me: you falling for a

cyborg isn't that weird."

John was shocked at what she was telling him; he wasn't sure whether it was what she was saying or the fact she was actually telling him that did it. He remembered what Ellison had told him; that she just got her kicks from winding people up. He appreciated the fact that at she'd levelled with him.

"Thanks," he said simply.

"Doesn't mean we're engaged or anything," she mock-huffed, smiling slightly beside herself.

Ellison appeared from the hangar entrance and knelt down by Savannah. "You okay?" he asked.

Savannah looked up at him and nodded. "Yeah," she said with a slight smile. She'd never admit it but it had felt good to actually talk to someone. No way was she going to open the lid on everything that had happened to her. Not yet. Maybe when they'd gone back to the past she'd think about it. *Maybe.* But for now they had more important shit to sort out.

"You'll want to see this," Ellison said to John. "She's ready."

John shot up to his feet in an instant and held his hand out for Savannah. She shook her head and picked up all her weapons, putting them back into place and then getting up herself. "You're not gonna start holding doors open for me, are you?" she asked, switching back to Hard-Savannah in an instant. She might have opened up a little to John but she wasn't a little girl anymore. She could take care of herself.

John rushed into the hangar and was taken aback at the sight before him: Cameron, in her own body, facing him, the spark of life clear in her eyes. The dust was still in her hair and on her clothes where she hadn't bothered to brush it off. John opened his mouth to say something but he stuttered, agape, finding himself lost for words.

He'd wanted to find her for so long, but it was as Ellison had told him; he'd never really thought about what he would say when he got her back.

"I missed you." *Understatement of the century,* part of him thought in the back of his mind.

Cameron gave a small smile and met his gaze. "Me too," she said. John didn't know how much she'd wanted to be back with him.

"You have no idea what I went through to find you," John felt moisture forming in the corner of his eyes and knew he was close to tearing up. He felt himself trembling slightly.

"I'm sorry," she looked away from him, her eyes cast downward. She was the cause for all his suffering and hardship. It was because of her. "For leaving you."

"It doesn't matter now." Nothing else did, John thought: none of the death and destruction, none of the misery and the shit of the future; because he'd found Cameron. He had her back.

"I repaired the damage to her endoskeleton," Weaver appeared from what seemed like nowhere. Savannah scowled at the sight of her but stayed where she was, trying to keep down the flame-cooked racoon she'd eaten some fifteen or so hours ago. It was difficult: the sheer sight of the thing posing as her mother made her sick to her stomach.

Ellison saw her discomfort, even though she tried to hide it. "Can't you look like someone else?" he asked.

Weaver didn't see why she should; Savannah's feelings were no concern to her but she decided to grant his request and she selected one of the hundreds of forms she'd taken on in the past. She grew taller, her face and body changed and she morphed into the form of a tall, striking brunette with piercing blue eyes and high cheekbones, wearing a black dress. "Better?" she asked.

"You're still here, so no," Savannah spat.

Weaver altered the form slightly and changed the dress and high heels into more suitable attire: an olive green jacket and grey cargo pants with black boots. "I'm afraid I can't change that," she said to Savannah. She didn't understand why humans held grudges: it was a counterproductive and often self-destructive behaviour.

"I'm different now," Cameron told John, returning to the subject of her alterations.

"How?" John asked, interested. She seemed like the same Cameron to him.

Cameron looked away from John and towards the UCAV nearest the hangar door, an X-45C. She accessed its flight computer and took control. "Stay away from the aircraft," Cameron told them.

The engines started with a low whine that grew higher and louder. Hot air spewed from the exhaust nozzle at the rear of the aircraft as hot gases pushed it forwards. The UCAV taxied forwards towards the hangar doors. A second UCAV started up and slowly followed after the first.

"That's... *you* doing that?" John asked, incredulous.

"Yes," Cameron smiled. John Henry had been right: she was more than just a terminator. She was slowly beginning to realise that now. "I wasn't built for this. I didn't know I could do it." Cameron accessed all of the UCAVs, both on the ground and in the air. There were four currently operating over LA and the surrounding area, two in the hangar waiting to be refuelled and rearmed, and six ready for sortie and awaiting their target data to be uploaded.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," Weaver said, "because its time to get back to fighting Skynet."

John shook his head and stepped closer to Cameron, instinctively trying to protect her from Weaver. "No," he said, adamant he wasn't going to back down on this one. "We're going home. I told you before: I came through to get Cameron. I've got her. We're going back."

"Not without my help you're not," Weaver gave a sly smile, amused that John thought he had a choice in the matter. Not even Cameron would be able to rebuild a TDE; they were going nowhere. "And I say when we go back. Cameron's the most advanced artificial intelligence after Skynet." Not including herself, she thought. But her design rendered her unable to do what Cameron and John Henry could. "She needs to learn how to fight Skynet or this will all be a waste."

"That's not our plan." Ellison countered.

"We're going back," Savannah added.

John nodded his head in agreement with them and locked eyes with Weaver. "We have a lead on Skynet: possibly the best one we'll ever get. We can go back and prevent it."

"Oh?" Weaver commented with genuine surprise. Even she didn't know exactly where Skynet was or how to stop it. She'd never found out where Kaliba or where the AI that would become Skynet was based. How did they find out? "What is this lead?"

"We're not saying." John wasn't going to tell her. Danny Dyson sounded like an ass from what Ellison had said, but he seriously doubted the guy knew he was bringing about the end of the world. He didn't deserve to die, and if he told Weaver he was their ace in the hole she'd literally cut Danny to pieces. "We don't need to fight Skynet: we can go back and prevent it, stop Judgement Day from happening."

Cameron didn't know what John was planning but she was impressed. He was already growing into a capable leader and a

strong fighter. She agreed with him that it was better to stop Judgement Day, not least because John would be safer in a world without Skynet and the war.

"I need to talk to Cameron," John turned to the others. *"Alone."* Without waiting for a reply he took Cameron by the wrist and led her to the far end of the hangar, where several offices were partitioned by plaster walls with small windows. They stepped inside one and John shut the door. Weaver could probably still hear them and would undoubtedly be eavesdropping, but he didn't care. He didn't want to be interrupted.

John sat down on top of a dusty old wooden desk and Cameron stood opposite him. He had so much to say to her but for now he had one burning question he needed answering. "Why did you go?" he asked her.

Cameron looked back at him and saw the hurt and betrayal he tried to hide. She'd known it would have upset him but she'd underestimated his attachment to her. There were several reasons why she left him, but she was unsure of how to explain to him without hurting him further. He might not understand.

"'Will you join us?'" John repeated the question Weaver had relayed to Cameron through Ellison. "That was it, wasn't it? That's why you left."

Cameron nodded. He was right. "You asked her the same question in the other future. When James Ellison gave me the message I knew I had no choice. John Henry was vulnerable, he needed to be protected."

"I thought *I* had to be protected," John replied. He'd still didn't understand how she'd suddenly switch and leave him after protecting him so zealously before.

"I'd expected you to work with Weaver in the past. With your mother and Weaver helping, you wouldn't have needed me. You'd need

John Henry to fight Skynet, so I helped keep him safe to ally with you in the future. I hadn't anticipated you'd come after me." Cameron realised she sounded a lot like Weaver – calculating and callous, and realised she needed to tell John something else. "I didn't want to leave you. I'm sorry."

John took in what she said and guessed that in some completely strange, machine way, it made sense, or at least it would to a machine. She'd thought she was protecting him. It didn't matter anymore.

Cameron was still surprised John had put himself in such danger by coming to the future to find her. There'd been no guarantee he'd have been able to find her or that he'd be able to return to the past. He'd risked his life for her and not for the first time. "Why did you come for me?" she asked.

John hadn't expected her to ask that and found himself caught completely off guard. He knew why he'd come after her; the same reason he'd been willing to throw himself at Vick when he'd been smashing her against the asphalt and the same reason he'd pointed a gun at his mom and Derek, and put her chip back in with no guarantees she'd have gone back to normal.

He'd never said it to anyone, never let himself even think it despite knowing it was true, not wanting to open up that can of worms. "Because..."

Something else caught Cameron's immediate attention as John stuttered. One of the UCAVs flying over LA was operating in an AWACS role; flying at 38,000 feet and using its active radar to detect targets and threats, and it detected what Cameron could only describe as an immense, imminent threat.

"We have to go," Cameron cut John off before he could say anything.

He saw the intense, serious look on her face as she flung the door open and pulled him out of the room towards the hangar entrance. "We have to go," she repeated loudly for the others to hear as she marched through the massive expanse, holding John's wrist gently but firmly and pulling him with her before he started moving and matched stride with her.

"What's wrong?" Savannah asked.

"I've detected a large wave of aircraft incoming. We have to leave."

"That decides that, then," Ellison commented as he and Savannah turned and followed Cameron and John towards the hangar doors. Weaver followed them a moment later. They headed towards the Jeep and Cameron took the wheel. The others opened the door but Savannah backed away as Weaver made to get into the back.

"I'm not sitting next to that... *thing,"* she spat out.

"We don't have time for this," Ellison groaned. He knew Savannah's pain but they were moments away from a massive air attack.

"Savannah; you sit in the front," John sighed as he moved towards the back. John sat behind Savannah, Ellison behind Cameron, and Weaver got into the large trunk at the back. She couldn't be uncomfortable and enjoyed being separated from the bickering humans.

Cameron drove off and sped away from the hangar as fast as she could. At the same time she took direct control of all six combat-ready UCAVs and launched them into the air as fast as she could, blasting them down the runway two at a time. She could see the acting-AWACS X-45C's radar screen and instantly knew she'd made the right decision in evacuating John: five waves of twelve HKs rapidly approached the hangar.

The six UCAVs tore down the runway one by one, each aircraft starting takeoff before the prior one had even cleared the tarmac. Once they were airborne they soared towards the approaching HKs, under Cameron's control. She'd warned John Henry that Skynet would learn and change tactics. She was right: it had adapted.

The UCAVs were entirely superior to Skynet's HKs in air to air combat, but Skynet had learnt well, and Cameron could see its tactics. The HKs stood no chance against the UCAVs but Skynet must have realised there were only a small number of the enemy aircraft, and their reliance on missiles meant they had a finite supply of ammunition on each airframe.

The UCAVs pushed forwards towards their targets and split into two flights of three drones apiece, each flight approached an HK squadron and accelerated hard towards their targets, reacting to their controller's urgency. Their targeting radars acquired the multiple bogeys and each locked onto four HKs. As soon as they were in range they released their AIM-120 AMRAAMs and pulled away. Twelve missiles streaked through the sky at four times the speed of sound and closed the thirty-mile gap within seconds. The HKs didn't stand a chance: the AMRAAMs tore into them and exploded, obliterating a dozen Skynet drones in the blink of an eye.

The second flight unleashed their own missiles and scored twelve direct hits seconds later. Twenty-four shots: twenty-four kills. There were three other HK squadrons fast approaching, however, and the UCAVs had expended all of their air-to-air weapons. The manmade drones, two decades old yet proven extremely effective against Skynet's 'superior' technology, that had flown through the skies of post-apocalyptic Southern California with impunity and rendering Skynet's defences helpless, could now do no more than fly impotently in circles, unable to act to stop the thirty-six remaining HKs from simply flying past them and on towards the hangar.

The HKs reached the hangar less than a minute after passing the defending UCAVs. They shifted their formations, flying in four-ship arrowhead formations, and accelerated to their top speed. The

moment they reached maximum weapons range they fired their cannons, strafing the hangar with large, powerful bolts of superheated plasma that glowed brightly as they cut through the air and smashed into the structure's walls, shattering and melting metal and concrete in a fraction of a second.

The first wave strafed and buzzed over the top, looping around as another flight repeated the action and shot at the hangar. When all flights had completed one pass they turned and faced the hangar. Their VTOL engines turned 90° and they hovered in the air, turned their powerful cannons towards the target once more and unleashed a storm of plasma bolts that punched through the walls and ceiling, penetrated through and ignited the last of the fuel and munitions, and shattered the UCAVs still inside. Hundreds of shots rained down and obliterated the hangar. Within one minute it was a smoking wreck. The destruction was observed by the UCAVs flying high out of range, looking down on the carnage below. John Henry's machine resistance against Skynet, passed down to Cameron, had come to a swift, abrupt end.

Chapter 15

A single Jeep Cherokee tore through the rough, rocky terrain of the Mojave Desert, kicking up a long trail of dust and rock fragments in its wake that hung in the air, like smaller versions of the multimillion-tonne clouds several miles above that spread across the world and blocked out the majority of light and heat from the sun. Cameron held her foot down on the gas pedal, working as much speed out of the old car as she could, trying to put as much distance between them and the hangar as possible. She was pushing sixty-five miles per hour on the rocky terrain and giving the three human occupants of the car a very bumpy ride, but none of them complained.

Cameron knew they would have to abandon the car shortly; it was low on gas and one of the axles was cracked and grinding underneath them. She'd estimated the Cherokee would have broken down ten minutes ago but it hadn't, so she was determined to carry on until either the car failed, became too dangerous to drive, or she determined they were safe. She'd aimed to drive them through the remote region west of Victorville but she knew the car wouldn't last that long anymore.

"There's nothing following us," Ellison looked back through the rear windscreen and seeing nothing but dust and empty desert.

"He's right, we can slow down now," John leaned forward. "We're okay."

Cameron still had access to all of the UCAVs in the air. They were still operational and flew high out of the HKs' range. Their radar range included their current location and there were no HKs within five miles of them. She opened her window and poked her head out, scanning the skies with her enhanced vision – glad to be able to see in full colour again – to make sure there were none following at a

distance, flying too low to be detected on UCAV's radars. She saw nothing and was satisfied there were no immediate threats, but still didn't slow down.

The factory John Henry had taken control of was still operational and the first tranche of twenty-four machines was complete, but she knew Skynet wouldn't tolerate it and would soon attack it with a massed airstrike as it had done with the hangar. The UCAVs would soon run out of fuel and with no friendly airfields they would crash. But the autonomous infantry units had power cells similar to her own and could operate for long periods of time. She knew they could be useful later, so she sent an order for all twenty-four operational machines to arm themselves with the plasma rifles supplied in the factory and to head north; out of LA County and away from both the bulk of Skynet's machines in the area and potentially hostile human fighters. She then issued new target coordinates to the UCAVs in the air. Their last actions would be to release their ground attack munitions on a number of Skynet installations before they ran out of fuel.

Cameron spun the wheel left and sharply turned the car hard right, tilting it forty degrees for several seconds and pinning Savannah and Ellison to their doors before the car levelled out back onto all four tyres and carried on.

"What was that?" Ellison asked, still in shock. He'd held on for dear life, convinced the car would tip over. He looked at Savannah in the seat in front of him and saw her reflection through the rear view mirror: she looked completely calm and unaffected by it.

"We can't be too careful," Cameron said.

John knew she was right. "Putting angles between us and them," he added, "same as a hare does." If there was one thing he knew how to do well it was running and hiding: he'd done it more than enough times to know that just putting distance between you and your pursuer wasn't enough, especially when what was hunting you was that much faster; you had to change direction, put angles as well as

distance between you to throw them off balance or off your trail, and make it that much harder for them to find you.

"Where do we go now?" Savannah asked. "What exactly is our game plan?"

John realised they hadn't discussed that since they left. "We want to go back, so what do we need?" he asked.

"A time machine," Ellison supplied helpfully. "But I'm guessing now that Skynet's winning the war that it's the only one that'll have one; no resistance means no time machine, right?"

"Wrong," Cameron said, keeping her eyes on the road and still searching for any threats from the front. "Skynet's winning, it doesn't need the TDE. It likes things how they are."

"'TDE?'" Savannah asked.

"Time displacement equipment," Cameron explained. "Skynet wouldn't have built it."

"How are we gonna get back without one then?" Savannah huffed. It looked like they wouldn't be going back after all, she guessed.

A silver metallic shape rose up from the trunk in a long arc and flowed down into the centre seat between John and Ellison, growing taller and wider until it took the new brunette form of Catherine Weaver. She inadvertently touched John's hand as she took form and a shiver ran up his spine; she was that cold to the touch. How the hell did she ever trick anyone who might brush past her? He wondered.

"The TDE in Zeiracorp's basement," she said.

"You think that thing will still work?" Ellison asked.

"I built it to last. Its how I planned to return once John Henry was ready." John stared at her for a moment. Of course she'd have had a

way back. Machines were nothing if not meticulous. She'd have planned every last minute detail. "I built it into the walls and the floor so it wouldn't be discovered." She turned to face John.

"Slight problem," Ellison countered. "Last time that thing was used it caused a blackout that lasted two days. Half of Southern California was affected. Where are we going to get that kind of power?"

Cameron knew the answer to that. "Serrano Point." An aerial recon conducted days ago had revealed the plant was still operational.

"Correct," Weaver nodded her head. "Without John there was no resistance: nobody captured the Serrano Point and it's still under Skynet's control." She'd planned for it to be run by John Henry, but skipping the last eighteen years had meant that Skynet had retaken control in this timeline too. It was no matter: when they returned it would be entrusted to Cameron, along with much more.

They carried on driving through the desert. Cameron had a plan regarding how they could collect the necessary power for the TDE, but there were more immediate matters and she decided she'd share her idea with John later. The outskirts of Victorville appeared up ahead, and in the distance the jagged, skeletal remains of a thousand buildings reached out into the air. HKs were visible to Cameron several miles out. None were nearby and none would see them, but it was still daylight for another two hours and they were an obvious target in the Jeep.

"We have to get out soon," Cameron told them. "Machines will spot the Jeep, and we're almost out of gas." The needle had long since hit empty and the engine was already spluttering as it struggled to run on the last few fumes. They had perhaps five minutes left before they would have to abandon the vehicle and continue on foot.

Savannah looked back and saw that like her, Ellison and John were wearing their seatbelts. Good, she thought. *"Cameron, stop the car!"*

Cameron slammed on the brakes as hard as she could without putting the pedal through the floor and the Jeep screeched horrendously with the rapid deceleration. Weaver, not wearing a seatbelt, was launched straight forward past Savannah and Cameron and smashed through the windscreen like a bullet, causing an explosion of liquid metal and shattered glass as she soared over the hood. She splattered against the hard desert ground in front of the car, flattening against the rocky floor and sending pieces of her flying out in globules of flesh coloured semi-liquid metal.

"What is it?" Cameron asked her, searching for whatever threat Savannah had seen.

"Nothing," she shrugged.

"Why did you tell me to stop?" Cameron pressed, confused.

Savannah tilted her head at Weaver on the ground in front of them as the T-1001 started to reform itself. "It wasn't wearing a seatbelt," she smirked.

"You did it... to piss her off?" John asked, incredulous. Cameron smiled slightly in amusement; she didn't like Weaver, either.

"Why not?" Savannah said nonchalantly as she opened her door and pulled her pack out from underneath her seat. She pulled it on and shouldered her rifle, making sure the M-32 was still strapped to her. John, Cameron and Ellison got out of their respective doors and did the same. Weaver finished shaping herself back into human form.

"Don't do that again," she snapped irritably at Savannah.

Savannah stepped up close to Weaver, a look of pure hatred on her face as she glared at the thing in front of her. She wanted so badly to kill the thing and it pissed her off to no end that she couldn't. "Listen to me, you liquid metal *freak,"* she snarled, her voice full of hostility. "Just stay the fuck away from me." She sucked up a mouthful of saliva and spat hard into Weaver's face. Weaver made no response:

Savannah's hostility towards her didn't matter unless she became a problem to their plans; if the girl did then she'd have to deal with her.

Savannah turned away from her, shouldered her rifle and took point, marching across the rocky ground towards Victorville.

John groaned inwardly. He didn't know what to do if Savannah and Weaver couldn't manage to work together. They all needed each other. He'd have to get Ellison to talk some sense into her later; he reckoned she might listen to him.

"Weaver, take the rear. Ellison, you're behind me and Cameron. We need to find somewhere to hide up so we can decide how we're gonna get the TDE back up and running. Let's go."

With Savannah setting the pace they started the march to Victorville. John left Cameron behind Savannah and went back to Ellison. "Give me your rifle," John told him. Ellison nodded and pulled the HK-417 and its sling off his shoulder, removing some of the burden he was carrying. "And the magazines?" John asked.

Ellison opened up a pouch and pulled out four magazines – clipped together in pairs, totalling six with the pair already connected to the rifle. "Spare rounds are in the right pocket," he gestured to his rucksack.

"Thanks," John said. "We'll get them later." He jogged forward to Cameron and held out the rifle and magazines. "I got you a present."

"It's tight," Cameron replied with a slight smile on her face, remembering how she said the same thing once before. John grinned too as he recalled her saying it a few times, so long ago. Happier times, he thought. *Well, relatively, anyway.*

They continued on into the outskirts of Victorville as the desert gave way to the remains of streets and houses, many of which had been blown apart but not by nuclear blast waves, John noted.

They passed the rusting remains of an Abrams tank in the middle of one road; there was a massive gaping hole where the turret joined the main body of the tank, large enough that any of them could have crawled inside through it. As they got closer to it John could see a charred skeleton still sat in one of the chairs inside.

"Probably got roasted alive when the tank took a hit," Savannah said. "Not a nice way to go."

"Looks like there was a hell of a fight here," Ellison commented. All around them were skeletal remains of soldiers – some still wearing their Kevlar helmets and boots – their destroyed vehicles, and the wrecks of the few machines they'd managed to bag before losing the battle. Practically every house had been damaged to varying degrees. Some had been completely obliterated by bombs, artillery or tank shells, whilst others had merely minor structural damage to them.

The sight reminded Cameron of many similar scenes in the future she'd originated from, and also the one she and John Henry had passed shortly before they'd met up with Weaver. The area was littered with burnt, twisted and rusty military vehicles and bones – full and partial skeletons. Every street ahead was blocked by walls of cars and trucks – improvised barricades to delay the machine's advance, she knew. Some of them had been penetrated: one twelve-foot-high barricade had been blown apart in the middle and a pair of T-1 drones – the predecessors of the Centaur tanks – stood inactive, their top sections had been blown apart.

"They were defending the city," Cameron said as they marched through the remains of the barricade. Inside was similar carnage but multiplied tenfold. "They tried to hold the machines but failed." Cameron found herself sympathetic to the long dead human soldiers. She identified with them: they'd died defending the civilian population from the machines, as she would for John without hesitation. She was surprised at her empathy for the dead soldiers and was unsure of where the sensation had originated.

"I don't like being out in the open like this," Ellison said nervously. It was too dangerous to be travelling out in the open during daylight. They hadn't run into a single machine yet but he couldn't believe there'd be none here.

"He's right," John said. He looked around for a likely place but it was all the same: destroyed houses and office buildings, jagged piles of rubble and metal that could cut a man to pieces if he tried to hide inside; evidence of the sheer ferocity of the battle that had once raged through Victorville.

Cameron searched for somewhere they could hide and quickly located a manhole cover. She went up to it and pulled it up, looked inside and deemed the sewer tunnel underneath was large enough for them all to fit inside. "Here," she called the others to her. They could use the sewers to travel to the other side of the city without being spotted by HKs.

One by one they all climbed down into the sewer and Cameron closed the cover after them, immersing them in total darkness.

"I can't see a thing," Ellison said quietly. Savannah took off her pack and pulled out her night vision goggles. For a long time she and Ellison had only had the one pair between them and he'd always insisted she keep them. She put them on and the world reappeared in a ghostly green glow.

Cameron and Weaver had no problem seeing at all, however. Cameron grasped John's hand in hers and laces her fingers with his, noticing that John didn't try to pull away. "I'll guide you," she told him.

"Thanks," John smiled at her gratefully. He noted that he once again depended on Cameron, even more now she was seeing for him. He didn't like having to depend on someone else to act as his eyes. It reminded him of when Derek and Kyle had frogmarched him blindfolded down the tunnel and he'd fallen over and stepped on all manner of unpleasant things. He knew Cameron wouldn't let that happen to him, though. He knew he could depend on her.

"How far is it to LA?" Ellison asked.

Cameron reviewed her knowledge of Southern California and calculated the distance in a fraction of a second. "Sixty-two-point-eight miles to Zeiracorp," she said.

"As the crow flies," John pointed out. "Going through the sewers here and in LA might take it up to a hundred."

"Hell of a trek," Savannah commented. It could take them a day or more just to make their way through the sewers in the darkness. With only three out of five of them able to see anything moving quickly would be impossible.

John nodded in silent agreement with her, but it had to be done. "We'll keep going through the sewer until we hit the outskirts on the other side. Once we're clear of the city we should be safe enough to move in the daylight." Angeles National Forest was between Victorville and LA County: vast areas of – probably now – dead trees. It'd be plenty of cover for them to move through. It was going to be one long march, he thought.

"Lead the way," Cameron told Weaver. "Head west." She stared back at Cameron, unaccustomed to being given orders, but she saw she was the only one who could. John was dependent on Cameron to guide him through the dark tunnel, as was Ellison on Savannah. She was the only one able to see who was unburdened, and also the most powerful of them. She'd be able to eliminate any threats in their path. She morphed into a silver sliver and disappeared down the tunnel, out of sight.

"Nice job getting rid of her," Savannah said to Cameron.

"You shouldn't talk," she replied, her voice low. "There could be machines in the sewer: if there are they'll hear us."

They continued down the tunnel in silence, the only sounds being their breathing and their footsteps, both of which sounded far too

loud to him. Cameron was right, he thought; if there were any machines down here they'd be sure to find us. He just hoped the noise was louder in his head than it really was. Marching in pitch blackness with only two of the group able to see or realistically have a chance of defending themselves: *another fine day on Planet Connor.* He felt Cameron's hand squeeze his for the barest fraction of a second, so quick and so faint that John wasn't sure if he hadn't just imagined it. But it reminded him of what he'd achieved already: he'd gone through hell but now he had her back. The worst part was over as far as he could see and it should be all downhill from now on. Considering that, he thought, maybe it wasn't so bad.

Kyle limped down the stairs to the station platform, leaning on the rail a little, and clenched his jaw in pain every time he put weight down on his left foot. It wasn't as bad as it had been; at least he could walk around without crutches now. If they'd had a doctor among them he doubtless would have told Kyle he was doing too much too soon, but he had no choice. He wasn't going to let himself be a burden or slow the others down. He'd pulled his own weight even with the injury, as would have been expected from anyone in the group. He was only walking – or limping – wounded. He could still help.

Downstairs was a frenzy of activity; everyone was busy on their own tasks, working to get them all ready to move. He saw Allison sat on the ground with almost their entire armoury spread out around her and boxes of ammunition, grenades, and improvised explosives were stacked out on display. Dozens of magazines had been placed into neat piles and she was sorting through it all. As always, Cassie sat faithfully by her side.

"Hey," he limped up to her. She flashed him a brief, but bright smile; something he hadn't seen on her face in a long time. Reasons to smile came few and far between lately. The last time he remembered seeing Derek smile was when he'd gotten wasted on some of Manny's moonshine about a year ago.

"How's the leg?" Allison asked as Kyle slowly sat down beside her.

"Getting better," Kyle shrugged, or at least he hoped it was, anyway. "What's up?" he asked. "You okay?" She'd seemed to have cheered up lately, since their talk in the tunnel, and they'd spent a lot of time together since then.

"Yeah," she said as she went back to the ammunition in front of her. "Just counting up our ammo; splitting it up so everyone's got their fair share."

"What's the score?" Kyle asked, looking at the weapons all around her. He counted only three plasma rifles, two shotguns, an AK47, and the rest were M4s or M16s; two of which had M203s attached.

"Not good," she replied, dismay visible on her face in the dim, flickering light of the fires they'd put around to illuminate the camp. "Down to maybe fifty shots each for the plasma rifles; three full magazines for the AK, and only five grenades for the 203s." They both shared a wary look between them; if they got caught in a firefight they were royally screwed.

"We should have moved out a year ago," Allison said sadly, thinking of all the others they could have saved, and the better chance they'd have had back then.

"You can't think like that," Kyle countered as he started loading 5.56mm rounds into magazines. They had plenty of 5.56 left but it was like a bee sting to the metal; it'd take a solid week of constant firing to even put a dent in a Triple-Eight with an M16. "A year ago we wouldn't have got out of LA alive. Tomorrow's the best chance we're ever gonna get."

Kyle had memorised Derek's plan, as had Mac, so that if anything happened hopefully at least one of the three would be left and able to lead the group. They would head south through the tunnels until they reached the end of the line, as far south on the outskirts as they could get. If it was light out then they'd wait until dark before climbing

up to the surface at Long Beach – the end of the Metro line - then hug the shoreline as much as they could as they headed south until they could cut east to the series of national parks, and march through them until they crossed into Mexico. It would be a hellish journey and a long shot, but it was their best and only chance.

Mac marched down onto the platform and stepped over to them with a large dead animal over his shoulder. He dropped it down onto the floor and a large beast splayed out on its back, causing Cassie to jump backwards in surprise. She edged forward and sniffed the animal curiously.

"Wild boar," Mac grinned at them. Both Kyle and Allison couldn't help but lick their lips unconsciously. They normally ate rats, mice, the occasional dog that they managed to find: an actual pig was a feast. "Might as well eat a good meal before we head out," he said to the pair. None of them said it but they all shared the same thought: they might never get the chance to eat well again.

A similar thought crossed Allison's mind and she waited until Mac picked the Wolfhound back up and went on his way. She'd thought about it a few times since they'd spoken in the tunnel together but now just decided to take it seriously. "I was thinking," she said as Mac disappeared up the stairs with their evening meal. "Maybe after we eat tonight we could... spend some time together. Just the two of us?"

"You mean the three of us?" Kyle smiled in ignorance and patted Cassie's head. Allison never went anywhere without Cassie.

"No," Allison shook her head and stared at Kyle intently like a hawk. *"Just us.* We might never get another chance."

Realisation sunk into Kyle's brain as he caught her meaning. He'd always seen her as a little sister, almost. Yeah, he'd had the odd thought about her, caught her undressed a few times and found it hard to look away, but he'd never even entertained the idea of doing anything with her. They'd been close friends since he could

remember, and wouldn't have wanted anything to ruin that. And he'd been wary of getting that close to someone in case they got themselves killed the next day. She was right though, he realised. They might never get another chance.

"Yeah," Kyle nodded with a smile, sliding his hand over Allison's and squeezing gently. "I'd like that."

Cassie snapped her head to the left, towards the left hand side of the tunnel, and let out a low growl. Both Kyle and Allison looked at where Cassie was barking and any thoughts of tonight were torn from their thoughts and replaced by a deep sense of dread and foreboding. "Someone's coming," Kyle said quietly.

Cassie's growl erupted into a series of manic, vicious barks, spitting out flecks of saliva everywhere. *"Stand to!"* Kyle shouted out to the others as he grabbed a plasma rifle from the row in front of her and Allison. She grabbed another one as Derek came and picked up the third, followed by Mac a second later, selecting the AK. One by one the entire group picked up weapons and ammunition, arming themselves to take on whatever was coming.

"What's going on?" Derek asked.

"Cassie's gone nuts," he replied, earning a glare from Allison. She didn't like people insulting her best friend like that. "She's heard something," he corrected himself. Cassie chose that moment to bound from beside her mistress and leap off the platform, down onto the track. She started running down the tunnel on the left before Allison intervened.

"Cassie: stop!" she shouted at the top of her voice, freezing the dog in midstride. Cassie looked back hesitantly, as if she were about to carry on regardless, but she held back as Allison ordered. They'd learnt one thing though: where the threat was coming from.

"Forget this," Derek said. He wasn't going to wait for the tin cans to hunt them down. "We're taking the fight to them. Mac, Allison: come

on. Everyone else grab whatever you can and get ready to move out. If you hear firing or we're not back in five minutes, leave and don't come back." Maybe some of them, at least, would make it.

"I'm coming, too," Kyle limped behind, holding his plasma rifle tight. He wasn't about to let Allison go anywhere where metal was without him to watch her back. Not now.

"Only if you can keep up," Derek replied. The four of them marched their way down the tunnel and away from the station platform. He couldn't believe their bad luck: hours away from leaving this shithole city for good and the machines just *had* to show up. He wondered if there was a god out there, what the hell he'd done to piss him off.

The three humans and two cyborgs marched down the subway tunnel, weapons at the ready to counter any threat they came across. Weaver still took the lead, followed by John and Cameron – the latter now also armed with the RPG launcher, too – then Ellison. Savannah brought up the rear, electing to keep as much space between herself and Weaver as possible.

They'd been on their feet for days on end, only resting for short periods at a time, and John felt blisters starting to form under his feet from the friction of four days' constant travel. It had taken them a day and a half to navigate their way through the sewers beneath Victorville, all of it in pitch darkness and being completely dependent on Cameron to guide him through the labyrinth. It had been a testament to her that he'd not tripped over once during the forty-hour hike in the tunnels.

After which they'd emerged into the outskirts of the southwest side of the city. After becoming accustomed to the dark for so long even the dim greyness that greeted them from above had been blinding, taking several minutes for the three humans in the group to adjust once more to daylight.

John had them all moving both at night and in daylight through the Angeles National Forest, marching through miles upon miles of dead trees, bare of all their leaves, which had made the scene the eeriest place John had ever been, like something out of a cheesy horror movie. As soon as they'd reached the outskirts of LA County they'd descended under the first sewer tunnel they'd found, having to move once more in the darkness until they crawled up through a shaft that had connected to the old Metro system, closer to the surface and pocked with holes and vents that allowed air and some light inside.

Now they marched down a seemingly endless Metrorail tunnel under East LA, only a few miles from Downtown and their objective. Weaver knew exactly where she was going; having travelled the opposite way when she'd abandoned John to the humans underneath Zieracorp.

"Hey," Ellison panted. "Can we take a break?"

"No," Weaver admonished. This was one of the things she didn't like about humans: they were weak. If a machine were running low on power or damaged it would carry on until it achieved what it set out to do or it ceased to function. Even herself and Cameron – machines no longer bound by programming – would still carry on until the end. She knew a select few humans who would do the same: John, for one, plus various accounts she'd read of rather incredible humans who'd displayed endurance and determination far beyond normal levels – but they were the exception.

"Yes," Savannah countered. John looked back at Ellison and saw him breathing heavily and sweat pouring down his face. The man was exhausted. He'd forgotten Ellison was almost three times his age.

"We could all do with a break," John said. He sat down against the curved tunnel wall and saw a flash of irritation on Weaver's face as he did so and as Savannah and Ellison sat down opposite. Cameron moved next to John but stayed upright on her feet, the HK-417 held in her hands.

Savannah pulled out her canteen and took a swig of water before handing it to Ellison. "Finish it off," she said to him. There was only a few mouthfuls left in there anyway and he needed it more than her. They'd already exhausted their food and most of their water now. John took out his own bottle and drained the last of it down his neck, following their example.

"Once we get there, how long before you can get the TDE up and running?" John asked Weaver.

Weaver didn't turn to look at him but instead watched through the tunnel, keeping watch the opposite end from Cameron. "A few hours," she replied simply. Her words were simple but she knew that restoring the time displacement equipment would not. She had no doubt of her ability to complete it, barring any unforeseen circumstance, but it would take time.

A dog barked in the distance and all five of them shot their heads towards the source; somewhere down the end of the tunnel Cameron was facing. The noise was faint, distant, but getting louder, which all of them knew could only mean one thing.

John snapped up to his feet and picked up his rifle. Savannah followed an instant later, as did Ellison – scrambling to his feet very quickly despite his age and fatigue, impressing John with his speed. John crouched down on one knee close to the wall and shouldered his rifle, and Cameron did the same, staying just ahead of him so she could block any shots aimed at him. Ellison lay prone on the ground and set up his machine gun, and Savannah took the opposite tunnel to John.

Weaver stood in the centre of the tunnel and made no move at all, remaining statuesque. "Fire when they appear," she told them. "Keep them distracted and I'll eliminate them."

"We're not killing anyone until we know what we're dealing with," John shot back at her. It could be just some innocent tunnel rats going about their business and just happened to have the bad luck of

having a dog with them that caught a whiff of either Cameron or Weaver.

"Got that, Weaver?" John asked. She gave no reply and he shared a look with Cameron. Her face was expressionless but he could see in her eyes that she was thinking something similar to him.

"John's in charge," she said bluntly to Weaver. "Not you."

"Without me you won't get home," Weaver said.

"Without John we won't stop Skynet," Cameron countered. The machine resistance Weaver had conceived was gone. It had failed, John had succeeded: everyone present was the beginning of his resistance.

"No one fires unless they shoot first," John reiterated.

The barking grew louder and louder, followed by shouting voices and boots hammering down on the concrete. It came closer and closer until he could just about make out silhouettes in the dim light ahead.

"Four, maybe five of them," Ellison said, squinting and straining to see. His eyes weren't what they used to be, just like the rest of me, he thought wistfully.

"Is it metal?" Savannah asked as she flicked her rifle to automatic. *Screw it,* she thought. Either way she was bringing out the big guns. She dropped the rifle and let it hang from the sling on her shoulder and in the same motion brought up the M-32. Metal or human, she'd feel better with the extra firepower.

Cameron kept her rifle raised and remained poised to shield John from incoming fire. Her visual acuity was several times better than any human's and she could not only see in the dark as well as if it were daylight, but she could also see further. When John, Ellison and Savannah could just about make out shapes, she could see

their features with absolute clarity. What she saw surprised her as she focused on two familiar faces and her mirror image.

"It's Derek," she said to John. She hadn't expected to see them; she'd assumed they would have remained in the same tunnel, since she and John Henry had taken great care to ensure they weren't spotted by them.

What the hell? John was incredulous. What were they doing here? They'd clearly survived the Triple-8 attack, evidenced by Kyle and Allison's hunting him, and he'd figured they'd have moved on rather than risk staying in the same place, but what were the odds that they'd choose *here?*

"Everyone: *hold your fire,"* he repeated even more insistently. Weaver collapsed into a liquid pool on the floor that spread out wide and started to take on the exact colour and texture of the ground and the track beneath them, blending in perfectly. *What're you doing?* John stared down at the ground. He had a feeling that Weaver wasn't going to listen and this would end in people getting killed.

Before long four people came into view and John saw that Cameron was right. He recognised the faces of Derek, Kyle, and Allison, plus a taller black guy he'd seen in their camp but hadn't gotten his name. All were armed, and he noticed his not-father limping on one foot as he approached. It didn't seem to slow him down much, though. John wondered if that was because of the firefight: he'd thought Kyle and Allison would have been killed by Cameron's airstrike. He felt the guilt over being responsible for their assumed deaths evaporating, but that didn't make this any better. Things could still get bloody for both sides. A large German Shepherd bolted out in front of Derek and co, snarling, snapping and setting a beeline for Cameron as saliva flew from its mouth.

Cameron raised her rifle and fired a shot over the dog's head; the booming report of the shot stopped the dog in its tracks and echoed out through the tunnel.

"Hold it!" John shouted out to them when they were only twenty feet away. The dog retreated but still growled and glared at Cameron.

"Connor?" Derek called back, recognising his voice. Derek took a step forward and saw it indeed was him. Though he'd changed a fair bit: he wasn't naked, for a start, and he wasn't the clean shaven, spotless and manicured pretty-boy who they'd found in the tunnels weeks ago. He held his plasma rifle tight and stared down the iron sights he'd attached some years ago at John, not that he could really miss at this distance.

John stared straight back at Derek. Both their weapons were pointed at each other, as were all the others': Cameron was poised to trade fire with Allison; Ellison's machine gun was aimed at Kyle as he stared up the barrel of the younger man's plasma rifle, and Savannah held her M-32 at Mac, though the blast from a single shot would be enough to take out all four targets at once. But probably not before they fired off a few shots of their own. They could probably win a firefight, just about, but he didn't fancy the chances of any of them walking away.

"Mexican standoff," Derek commented gruffly.

John nodded in agreement; probably the first thing they'd seen eye to eye on since he'd arrived in the future. "We've got the advantage," John gestured to the side at Cameron. "So let's talk."

Allison glared at John with utter contempt, not even realising she was also trembling slightly with fear. Cassie barked and snarled wildly but remained at Allison's side, going crazy and just waiting for her order to attack. Saliva flew from her jaws as she stared at Cameron and anticipated tearing her apart. All the horrible things that had come to mind earlier now flashed in front of Allison and she pointed the plasma rifle at John. It was only a moment later she realised that right next to him was... *her,* staring with those wide, blank eyes and without any expression on her face whatsoever. Allison's trembling grew into full blown shaking in fear and anger,

both at John and the thing that looked like her. All she wanted to do was pull the trigger, *so badly.*

"You're sick," she spat out at him and shifted her aim back to Cameron, her finger started to tense on the trigger.

The ground behind Derek, Kyle and Allison rippled slightly and turned silver. It rose up into a gleaming chrome shape and started to take form into Weaver's new brunette facade. "I wouldn't pull that trigger if I were you," she said to Allison, still retaining her Scottish accent as the girl that looked like Cameron turned her head to look at the source of the voice behind her.

Weaver grew another pair of arms out of her chest and all four appendages morphed into chrome, razor sharp blades that tapered off to wicked looking tips that grazed the back of all four fighters' necks, cutting finely through the upper layers of skin and just barely drawing slight trickles of blood from each of them.

Derek, Kyle, Mac and Allison froze on the spot, not daring to move an inch and knowing the slightest move would get them either blown apart by John and his band of merry men/machines, or cut to ribbons by this thing behind them.

Cassie turned round and let out a constant low growl at Weaver, baring her yellowed fangs at the terminator, wanting desperately to rip her to shreds but seemingly afraid to.

"What the hell is that thing?" Kyle asked John, still holding his plasma rifle at Ellison but more because he was afraid to make a move, even to lower the weapon. Was that thing some kind of machine? Was it Skynet's, Connor's? It was... *alien,* was the only word he could conjure up to describe it, like it wasn't even from this world.

"Mimetic polyalloy," John explained, remembering what the Uncle Bob T-800 had told him. He saw on their faces they had no idea

what he just said, just like him at the time. "Liquid metal," he elaborated. "T-one-thousand."

"One-thousand-and-one," Weaver corrected him.

"What?" John asked, wondering what the hell the difference was. "Whatever." He turned his eyes back to Kyle. "She's the reason you're going to put your guns down," John said, "and we're gonna talk."

"Talk?" Allison laughed bitterly. "What the hell is there to talk about?"

Mac, for his part, calmly remained still and tried to work out what Connor's game was. He'd wondered what Connor was doing when he saw he'd only come with three others, but now he saw the kid had actually come in force. The old guy and the red haired girl were clearly human, but Allison's Terminator-twin was probably worth him, Allison, Derek and Kyle all put together; and this other liquid chrome thing behind them: who knew? He'd never seen anything like it before.

"We're not here for you," John answered.

"You're no threat," Cameron added. Derek thought he detected a slight insulting hint in the tone of her voice, as if they weren't even worth the effort of taking out.

"We're not putting our guns down," he replied. "Tell us what the hell you want first."

Weaver scraped the fine razor edge of her blade-arm across the back of his neck once again and dug the tip into his skin lightly, causing him to wince from the cold of it as well as the pain as it cut into him ever so slightly. "You have no choice," she told him coldly.

"Put them down," Kyle said as he slowly pulled his rifle's strap off his shoulder. He held the rifle by the butt and under the barrel, careful to make no sudden moves, and bent his knees until he was low enough

to place the weapon on the ground. Mac nodded his assent and followed suit. Derek watched his brother and Mac disarm themselves and realised the machine, if that's what the hell it even was, was right. Reluctantly he put his rifle down on the ground in front of him.

"Savannah," John nodded at her and she dropped her own weapon and moved towards their opponents. She picked up Derek's plasma rifle and kicked the other one and Mac's AK away, sending them skittering along the floor and out and away so none of them could dive forward for one.

Allison kept hold of her weapon and trained it on Cameron. He finger was tense on the trigger, just a hair's breadth from putting a plasma bolt through the cyborg's head, the only thing keeping her from doing it was the needle sharp blade prickling against her skin. In a heartbeat John turned his weapon on Cameron's human double, his finger already taking up first pressure on the trigger.

"Don't do it," John warned her.

"You'd kill me over that thing?" Allison asked as she shook her head.

"You won't kill me," Cameron told her. "Killing me is the same as killing yourself."

"It's *not* the same," Allison seethed. She actually felt offended that this tin can thought they were the same person. *"We're* not the same."

"You're right," Savannah shot out. "Cameron's not nuts, for a start."

Cameron realised Allison didn't understand her meaning. "If you shoot me John and Savannah will shoot you: killing me kills you."

"If she doesn't slice you up first," Ellison nodded at Weaver still standing behind them, ready and willing to cut them all to pieces without second consideration.

Allison blinked, surprised at the machine's understanding.

"Listen to me," John spoke aloud to Derek, Kyle, Allison and Mac. "Remember when I told you I was looking for my friend Cameron?"

All four of them nodded, remembering the wild stories John had told them. John continued. "Well *she,"* he gestured at her with his left hand, over the barrel of his rifle, *"is* Cameron. I've gone through hell to get her back and if you shoot her now I'll blow your head off and let Weaver – that thing behind you – cut the others to pieces." John stared her down with cold, hard eyes, and didn't betray a single ounce of emotion from his face.

"She'll probably enjoy it, too," Savannah added with venom in her voice. She knew John was bluffing – he probably would kill Allison if she shot Cameron but he'd never tell Weaver to tear the others apart. Whether they could stop her doing it was something else entirely.

Cameron remained still and kept her weapon aimed at Allison. "I'm aiming at your two front teeth," she told her human counterpart. "The bullet will shatter your teeth, penetrate through the back of your mouth and destroy your brainstem. No impulses will travel between your brain and trigger finger: you won't be able to fire back." She had detailed files and had used the technique several times: it prevented even a twitch reflex that could cause the victim to pull the trigger. But killing Allison wasn't necessary. She didn't have to die. "Please," she asked her.

Allison stared at the machine in shock. It had just *asked* her to put her gun down. The cold facts she'd stated chilled her to the core almost as much as its final word: 'please'. Since when did a machine ever ask – nicely or otherwise – for anything? Still; it had a point and she felt her two front teeth tingle at the thought of a bullet smashing through them and lodging itself in her brainstem. The machine knew its stuff; it would know the best way to kill, of course, and she could see that if she squeezed the trigger anymore it would be her brain all over the floor before she could fire a shot, and her friends killed over

a useless gesture. The thought of the thing behind her gutting Kyle and slicing him apart was enough to make up her mind.

"Okay," she said quietly, exhaling slowly as she pointed the barrel at the ground and handed her rifle to Savannah, who took it from her and went over to stand beside Ellison.

"Weaver," John spoke, hoping his voice sounded as commanding as he'd intended. Probably not, he thought.

Weaver withdrew her blade-appendages and the two pairs merged into a single set of arms again as she returned to full human form.

Derek breathed out a sigh of relief, as did all of them. He was surprised that John had kept his word: a large part of him had been convinced that they'd open fire on them the moment Allison lowered her plasma rifle. He turned to John, wanting some answers. "You said something about talking?"

Chapter 16

John lowered his weapon and pointed the barrel down at the ground. Cameron followed his example and let her own battle rifle hang at her side, though she knew she could grasp it and fire accurately from the hip in less than one second if it became necessary. She still stared at Allison curiously. Was she similar to the Allison she'd met in her original timeline? She'd seen already that people weren't the same. John wasn't the same as Future-John, although he was learning fast. How different was this Allison?

Ellison stood up off the ground and picked up his machine gun, making sure the barrel wasn't pointed at them. Savannah kept her weapon drawn for a moment, hesitating just like Allison had, but she relented without having to be told. Besides, she thought; if they were going to try and start anything they'd have Cameron and her to contend with. And the ginger bitch. She glowered at the last thought.

John turned to Derek and looked him straight in the eye. "Everything I told you before: about me, Cameron, the past; it's all true."

Derek almost rolled his eyes in frustration. "Don't jerk us around," he said curtly.

"He's telling you the truth," Ellison replied.

"And who are you?" Mac asked. "You part of his group too?" he jerked his head at John. "The ones who've been kicking the crap out of Skynet?"

"What?" Ellison stared at him in confusion. *What group?*

"That was me," Cameron said. Technically it was true as John Henry was a part of her; they were the same now.

Allison stared at Cameron with contempt, almost mirroring Savannah's feelings towards Weaver. "You're just a machine," she spat, curling her fist into a ball in anger.

"I'm more than you think," Cameron replied.

John stepped between them, afraid a fight was about to start and knowing exactly how it would end if it kicked off. "That *was* Cameron, but it's gone now. Skynet destroyed it all."

"Always happens," Kyle shrugged. "Nobody lasts long against Skynet. You guys probably did better than anyone else in the last five years or so," he added.

"Thank you," Cameron said politely.

"Anyway," John tried to get them back on topic. "I'm from the past. Ellison and Savannah here knew me back in 2009."

"I was an FBI agent assigned to the Connor case," Ellison added.

"You mean *Sarah Connor?"* Mac asked. "The one on the news they thought blew herself up in a bank and then got arrested nine years later?"

"That was my mom," John nodded.

Mac could hardly suppress a grin as he remembered it all. "The most wanted domestic terrorist in America; broke out of jail and escaped without a trace. You remember that, Reese?" Ironic she'd been right all along, he thought.

Derek shook his head. "I was thirteen at the time; didn't really watch the news." He'd never heard of any Sarah Connor before.

Mac forgot that he was the old man of their group; he'd been twenty-five at the time. "She thought machines were gonna take over the world; blew up two computer factories trying to stop it."

"Back to the here and now," Derek said to Mac, bringing him back from the past. "There's no way you could be from 2009, kid. You told us the same crap before, why should I believe it now?"

A smirk appeared on John's face and he tapped the barrel stock of his rifle. "Think about it," he said to Derek. "Last time I was your prisoner; now we've got you at gunpoint I don't need to lie to you, we could kill you easy – Weaver probably wants to, in fact."

"It would be easier," Weaver replied, "we don't need them."

John ignored her comment. Why did Cameron only ever kill threats but Weaver would happily dice anyone that was even a mild inconvenience? But if Derek needed further convincing then that's what he'd do, John decided. "As I told you before: you and Kyle both love baseball; you were even playing it on Judgement Day when the missiles flew." He turned to Kyle, "you thought they were fireworks. You both hid in the tunnels under City Hall: you'd heard about them in school. I already told you about the deer Derek killed..." John thought about what else he could say to convince them. "You both have type AB-negative blood."

"How can you know all that?" Derek asked, incredulous. He'd heard some of it before from John but it was an unbelievable story and at the time the kid had been squirming to say anything that wouldn't incriminate him as a Grey.

"Because I'm from the past," John said, "because I *knew* you – *another you* – in another time, another life. He'd come back in time to help me and my mom stop Skynet. Everything I just told you came from him."

Kyle stared at John, wondering how any of this could be true. Time travel couldn't be possible, could it?

"What's more," John added, "we can prove it." Weaver had said the TDE was built into the walls and the floor; it should still be there.

Savannah raised her rifle up to her hip, pointing it in their general direction. "'what's more', is that we've got the guns and you're gonna do as we damn well say," she told them.

John saw her point; it didn't matter if they believed him or not when he could simply show them the TDE. "Weaver: take point-"

"I'll take the rear," Savannah cut in before John could continue. Wherever Weaver was, she'd be the opposite end.

"Where are we going?" Allison asked.

"Back to where you found me," John replied. "Let's move."

Weaver moved forward some distance ahead of the group, followed by Derek, Kyle, Allison and Mac, then John and Cameron, Ellison behind them, and Savannah brought up the rear. They took a side tunnel that led into the sewer, steering them away from the station platform and any chance of reinforcement coming to help Derek and the others. They continued on in silence for the most part; none of them felt much like socialising.

Allison stared continuously at Cameron as they marched down the tunnels. The machine freaked her the hell out, and what was worse was the way John was clearly close to it; how they marched beside each other and their shoulders or forearms would occasionally brush together, and the whispering that went on between them every now and again. Every time he muttered – too low for her to hear a thing – his face softened slightly. She knew she was right: he was definitely fucking the tin can.

"What's your story?" she spat out at Cameron, wanting to know what the hell she was about.

"I was sent to protect John," Cameron replied. She kept her voice neutral but she knew that she'd left him, abandoned him, and until four days ago hadn't been there to protect him. She'd failed, even if

temporarily, and she wouldn't let it happen again. "In the other future John sent me to keep him safe."

"This big-shot John you claimed to be in another future?" Kyle asked.

"Yes," Cameron said. "John's the last best hope for humans. He led the Resistance against Skynet: without him Skynet would have won."

"So how are you on his side?" Kyle asked. He'd never seen a machine that had turned against Skynet.

"Forget that," Allison said impatiently. "I want to know why you look exactly like me."

Cameron considered lying to her; she knew what Allison's response was likely to be if she told her the truth, but decided to anyway. She didn't see any reason to hide her past; they all knew what she was. "You were an intelligence officer in John's camp. Skynet built me in your image to infiltrate and kill him. John reprogrammed me and now I fight for him." John turned his head and looked at her for a moment, a little confused. He could have sworn he'd heard a hint of pride in her voice as she'd spoken about fighting for him.

"Great," Allison mumbled. "So what happened to me?"

"I killed you." Allison's eyes opened wide as she took it all in. She could barely believe it all.

"You're telling me that you're nothing to do with me – *me,* me?" Was this all just some massive, terrible coincidence?

"Not *you,* you," Cameron assured her.

That's something at least, Allison thought to herself; as long as the machine was telling the truth, at least. She didn't know what to think anymore.

Eventually, after miles and miles of tunnels and marching through patches of blackness, dank and dingy water, and constantly straining their ears to listen out for machines or any other threats, Weaver stopped and turned to them. "We're underneath Zeiracorp," she told them. John vaguely recognised the rough layout of the place from when he'd arrived.

They filtered into the main basement through a large hole in the wall and John instantly recognised the room he'd arrived in – and left from – before he'd been caught by Kyle and Derek. The place was just the same as he remembered moments before his capture; the walls were stained, the floor littered with debris, chunks of brick and plaster, and discarded junk. The whole place stank of mildew and decay. What caught the attention of Derek, Kyle, Allison and Mac, however, was the hole in the ground; a smooth, perfectly formed half sphere indented into the ground.

"What the heck's that?" Kyle asked.

"That's where I came through," John told him.

Weaver stared at the walls and quickly located where she'd hidden the TDE in a corner opposite the hole they'd entered the room through. Her forearms turned silver and changed shape – to the disgust of all the humans in the room save for John and Ellison – turning into pickaxe-shaped appendages. "Cameron," she beckoned and gestured at the wall. Cameron left John's side and stepped up to the wall beside Weaver.

Weaver pulled her pickaxe arms back and struck the wall hard, gouging two holes in the wall and spreading cracks out like a spider's web. Cameron followed her lead and punched hard into the wall, sending out clouds of reddish-brown brick dust with each strike of her fist. The others just watched as the two cyborgs punched and struck at the wall, tearing it down piece by piece with each blow, until they'd pulled it apart.

They stepped back when they were done – both completely covered in brick dust, and revealed the hidden chamber behind the wall. Inside was an array of machinery that John couldn't even begin to describe. An eight foot metal cylinder filled the hole in the wall, probably taller, he thought, since he couldn't actually see the top of it. It looked like it ran right up through the ceiling and beyond. A metal cable as thick as his wrist coiled tightly all the way around it like a python constricting its prey, snaking up to the top and out of sight.

"What is that thing?" Kyle asked, his wide open as he stared at it in curiosity.

"Electromagnet," Weaver replied. "One of four," she gestured to the other corners of the room. "Inside the walls, floor and ceiling are six superconducting rings." She pointed to the smooth crater in the ground. "One's under there," she told them. "When the TDE is activated it creates a sphere of supercharged electrons around the subjects inside. When it's fully powered the machine creates a wormhole through space-time to the targeted date, and the sphere travels through."

Derek stared at the contraption, realising from Weaver's lecture that what he was looking at was only a piece of the whole. "How the hell did you build this?"

"Time and money," she replied simply. She'd found it surprisingly easy to construct a TDE back in the past, where resources had been abundant. The technology required to build it was there; all that the humans had lacked was the conceptual design and a grasp of the physics involved. Skynet had calculated it all and it had been a simple matter of implementing its own design using the resources and tools available before Judgement Day. The difficult part had been creating it without attracting attention. More than one unfortunate employee had accidentally stumbled across its construction and never been heard from again.

Weaver stepped into the hole in the wall and pulled out a thick plastic box. She opened it and pulled out a laptop and several

cables. She opened up the laptop and turned it on, and they waited for it to load up.

It only took two minutes to load and she connected the wires to a port in a socket on the ground, at the foot of the electromagnet. She'd anticipated there would be damage to the TDE's control interfaces and buried a backup inside the walls. She ran a diagnostic test first of all, to ensure nothing had damaged the time displacement equipment over the past eighteen years. She'd built the machine to last, knowing it would remain unused for two decades, but she still had to make sure.

"It will work," she told them when the diagnostic was complete. "No damage to the equipment itself."

"This is... its crazy," Allison said quietly.

"Now what do you think?" John asked Derek.

"I believe you," Derek said, still in awe. "But Allison worded it better." This was just nuts. How could something like this even exist?

Weaver's fingers danced on the laptop's keys as she activated all the TDE's components. The engines that drove the machine, buried deep under the floor, started up with a low whine, and several LED lights on the electromagnetic cylinder winked on, causing a chill of anticipation to run through John's spine. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as he awaited the bubble to slowly form.

The whining faded and died, as did the LEDs.

"What happened?" Savannah asked.

"There's no power," Cameron told her. That was the only explanation.

"I thought you said Serrano Point was still online?" John queried.

"It is." Cameron had seen it through the UCAVs' sensors and the power plant was definitely operational.

Weaver checked everything once more and ran several more tests, taking a long while before she finally came up with the answer. "The underground conduits aren't receiving any power from the grid," she told them. Skynet still used some of the power infrastructure from before the war, namely underground power cables. They were intact, according to the tests she'd ran, but no power was forthcoming.

"Skynet cut us off," Derek said. Like the power or water company cutting off your supply if you didn't pay the bills.

"It didn't want people using its power," Kyle added. "Doesn't want people being able to use electricity; it wants to keep us in the dark."

Cameron knew that was true: electrical power was an asset to people: powering communications, lights, manufacturing facilities; she remembered how General Perry in her future had coined it: terminators can see in the dark and people are afraid of it. It was a simplistic statement but it was accurate.

"We can't use it, then?" Ellison asked. This couldn't be happening; their entire plan hinged on getting back to 2009. Without the time machine there was nothing they could do.

"Not without power," Weaver told them.

John stood silent for a moment, trying to think of some way out of this, some way of getting the TDE working again. Skynet wouldn't need a time machine because it was winning; there was no way they could organise any real kind of resistance and turn the tide. Not now.

"It's simple," Savannah said. "We need power, and the only place that'll give us enough is Serrano Point. Let's just take it."

"It's not a bad idea," John replied.

"I'm not just a pretty face," Savannah grinned at him.

John turned to Weaver. "Is it possible?" he asked her. "Reroute the power from Serrano Point to here?"

"No chance," Derek shook his head. "Serrano Point's got a legion of endos and its own airfield. It'd take an army to capture it."

"How did we do it before?" John asked Cameron.

"Guerrilla warfare, slow attrition of the plant's supplies and defences," Cameron replied, "then seaborne assault using the *Jimmy Carter* as a platform for TechCom commandos to secure Avila Beach." The battle had lasted all day and resulted in high casualties for the resistance. She recalled perfectly standing with John on the conning tower of the *Carter* , watching as inflatable raiding craft holding a squadron of TechCom special forces and reprogrammed T-888s sped across the sea in the dead of night to secure a beachhead on the plant's coastal flank as regular resistance fighters launched diversionary attacks from inland. A lot of humans died that day.

"That's out of the question then," Mac said sullenly.

"What's TechCom?" Kyle asked, curious.

"Michelle to Reese: come in Reese, where the hell are you?" Derek pressed the com button on his radio as Michelle's garbled voice came through in a haze of static.

"We're fine, Michelle. Wait one."

John realised from looking at Derek and the others that he couldn't do what he needed to do to get back to 2009. He couldn't get the power from Serrano Point. Not alone, anyway.

"We need your help," John said to Derek.

"Why should we help you?" Allison asked. "Every time we've dealt with you our friends have been killed."

John paused for a moment, knowing painfully that it was true. Neither time was his fault: the Terminator that had attacked them had been sheer coincidence but he knew they wouldn't have seen it that way; and the second time round they'd attacked him, Savannah and Ellison, forcing them to fire back and Cameron to bomb Kyle and Allison's squad.

"She's got a point," Kyle agreed.

"Because this isn't right," Ellison said. "You know this isn't how things were supposed to be, hunted down like rats by the machines. We can go back and change it."

Derek frowned at that. Of course this wasn't how things were supposed to be. Machines shouldn't be ruling the world and people shouldn't have to live underground, fearing for their lives. Everything about the last seventeen years was just wrong.

"Because we'll take you with us," John added. That caught their attention, he noticed. Four sets of eyes stared intently at him. "If you help us get power to this thing, you can come back with us, away from all this."

"We don't need them," Weaver said. "They're expendable."

"Nobody's expendable," John snapped back at her. What the hell was it with her?

Derek thought long and hard about John's proposal. It seemed almost too good to be true; going back to the past, paradise compared to this world. But what was the more dangerous: venturing south to find somewhere remote where Skynet wouldn't find them, through unfamiliar territory to an unknown destination; or a 300-plus mile round trip through Southern California to the power base of Skynet's forces in the region, which would undoubtedly be heavily

protected: *the frying pan or the fire?* A suicide mission either way, he figured. At least if they somehow succeeded and made it back to the past they'd never have to worry about Skynet finding them.

"We can all go back?" Derek asked. John simply nodded. "And you say you can stop Judgement Day before it happens?"

"That's the plan," Savannah said.

Derek nodded slowly, realising it was their best chance to escape the war for good. "We're in," he said, "but we've got to sell it to the others." He wouldn't make anyone join in on this mission; he'd give them the choice.

"I'll stay here," Weaver told John. "Serrano Point alone won't provide enough power at once; I need to create a buffer to build up the charge." It was the only way the TDE would work, but it meant it would take time to build up and if John insisted on bringing back more unnecessary, irrelevant passengers with them it could put considerable strain on the time displacement equipment; it wasn't designed to be used multiple times in quick succession.

"You do that," Savannah said as she stepped out of the room, taking point as they all began to filter out of the basement, leaving Weaver working on the TDE.

"Savannah," John said as he and Cameron were the last to leave the room. "Give them their weapons back."

Savannah pulled the plasma rifle she'd had slung over her back and raised her eyebrow at John. "You sure?" she asked.

"It won't look too good if we show up with them at gunpoint," John said. He didn't want to risk breaking this fragile alliance even before it got started. Savannah hesitated as Derek reached out for the weapon.

"Mind if I take a shot first?" she asked. "I've never fired one before."

"Sure," Derek shrugged.

Savannah hefted the heavy weapon and pulled it close to her shoulder – the thing was much heavier than her HK-417 and felt too bulky and clumsy in her small hands. *Better have a hell of a punch to be worth it,* she thought. So far she wasn't that impressed by it. She pointed it at a section of brick wall down the tunnel, took aim down the jury-rigged, tacked on iron sights at a spot perhaps fifty feet away, and pulled the trigger.

A blue-white plasma bolt shot out of the barrel with a high pitched shriek and struck just to the right of where she'd aimed. The brickwork exploded in a puff of dust and shattered bricks, and a jagged black hole the size of a dinner plate had been punched through the wall. There'd been practically no recoil, Savannah noted. Still, the spot she'd hit was wide of where she'd aimed.

"Not very accurate," she commented. "How many shots do you get out of this thing?" she asked Derek.

"Fifty," Derek answered, "forty-nine, now."

She lowered the weapon and handed it to Derek, something coming to mind she wanted to test. When she, Ellison and John had fought against these guys they hadn't scored a single hit with a plasma rifle. First she'd thought it was just blind luck but now she wasn't so sure. "Shoot through the hole I made," she told him.

"What's going on?" Allison asked.

"Just testing a theory," Savannah said. She nodded to Derek. "Do it."

Derek decided to humour her and took aim, hugging the butt into his shoulder and holding the weapon with more comfort than Savannah had. He fired once. The bolt burnt through the air and struck the wall to the right of her shot. She went up to the hole and felt the heat emanating off where the second shot hit; the edges of the bricks

were still glowing a faint, almost molten red. It was a good four inches wide of the hole she'd blasted with her shot.

She went back up to Derek and snatched the rifle out of his grasp, causing him to stare at her in confusion.

"What the-"

"Forty-eight shots now," she said as she crossed over to Cameron and handed her the plasma rifle. "She can make them all count."

"Thank you," Cameron smiled slightly at Savannah. She understood her point; the plasma rifles were designed to be used by terminators and Autonomous Infantry Units, who had inbuilt targeting systems and didn't need to use sights or scopes. She handed her HK-417 and ammunition to Savannah, who then passed it in turn to Derek.

"Great," he mumbled, not at all pleased with having to swap his plasma rifle but he wasn't going to risk his neck trying to get it back from Cameron. This was the first terminator he'd ever seen that hadn't tried to kill them on sight and he didn't want to risk changing that by pissing it off. He turned to John. "We need to get going," he said simply.

John looked at the Metrorail station Derek now called home since they'd moved from the tunnel he'd fled, seeming like a million years ago now. He'd counted only ten people left, including Derek, Kyle, Allison and Mac. That terminator attack had really done a number on them, he thought. There'd been close to thirty of them living in the old tunnel during his time there. They needed to get back as much as he did, he realised. Thirty people down to ten: a clear sign if any that people really were on the brink of extinction and Skynet was close to winning this war.

The few people who were left were in a frenzy of activity: ten army-style rucksacks were lined up alongside a wall at the bottom of a flight of stairs, plus webbing and pouches, and several duffel bags and rifles laid out.

"Were you planning on going somewhere?" Ellison asked.

A tall woman with dirty blonde hair stared at John for a moment before regarding Allison. "We were gonna break out while Skynet's forces are distracted and head south into Mexico."

"You won't make it," Cameron told her, earning a scowl from the woman. She was accustomed to being feared and hated, and knew it wasn't only because she was a machine but because she was a copy of Allison. Humans took exception to themselves being copied. Strange, she thought, because she'd once heard that imitation was a form of flattery.

"We've got two cars we've managed to get working," another man said to Cameron and John, carrying a pair of large plastic cans filled with water and setting them down beside the packed rucksacks. "Full gas tanks, too; took us a while to find the fuel."

"She's right," John gestured to Cameron. "You wouldn't make it down to Mexico."

The smell of cooking meat drifted down from up the stairs to the floor above. It meant nothing to Cameron but she could see John's nostrils flaring and he licked his lips.

Kyle descended down the stairs, stopping at the bottom and looking to John. "Dinner's ready," he told them.

John and Cameron went up the stairs to some sort of communal area. There was no furniture at all and people entered and sat down in small groups. Since the group had arrived back at the station Kyle and Allison had started preparing a meal, on Derek's request.

Kyle and Allison carried a large pot of hot, bubbling liquid into the room and set it on the floor, then went back into their impromptu kitchen and brought out a steel barrel.

"What's for dinner?" John asked, dreading to find out. His diet had been pretty much just dog and the occasional rat, since coming through to the future, and he had a feeling he'd eaten well compared to a lot of people.

"This was gonna be our last meal before we'd set off south, so we'd wanted to make it special," Kyle said.

"Wild boar," Allison got straight to the point. Catching the thing had been a lot of trouble but it had been worth it. This could well be the last meal any of them ever had, so they'd wanted it to be better than the garbage they'd eaten for dinner every day for as long as she could remember.

"Guess it's as good a last meal as any," Savannah said, her nostrils flaring slightly as the smell wafted to her. It smelled pretty damn good.

Everyone took out mess tins, spoons, and steel mugs, and filed into a queue for the food whilst Mac handed out ceramic bowls to John, Savannah, and Ellison, notably leaving Cameron out, John noticed. "I'm guessing you won't need one," Mac said curtly to Cameron. Cameron leaned into John and hovered over his shoulder, her lips an inch from his ear. "Don't ask what else is in the stew," she said softly to him.

"Why?" John asked, confused.

"You can't grow vegetables here," she explained, keeping her voice low so nobody else would hear her. She knew what went into the stews in the original future in the absence of vegetables: algae had been a commonly used ingredient, as were insects. John looked at the pot and saw green things he'd thought were leaves, but now he

wasn't so sure. He nodded to Cameron and decided it would be better if he didn't know.

"Sharing sweet nothings, are we?" Allison rolled her eyes at Cameron and John as she spoke to him. She'd been half right, she thought; John and the metal were close. Too close. Even if the tin can was nothing to do with her – from this timeline at least, from what they said – it was still creepy to see a person so clearly trusting of and close to a machine. If she had her way she'd just grab a plasma rifle and blow it away, not be eating across from it.

Savannah picked up the ladle and scooped a helping of the stew into her bowl and one for Ellison, and just stared at Allison. "Jealous, *are we?"* she commented, copying Allison's tone.

"How can you stand being around metal?" Allison asked.

"Cameron's okay," Savannah said as she turned away to head back to Ellison. "Makes better company than some," she made a show of looking Allison up and down, clearly emphasising who she was talking about, then strode off and went back to Ellison, handing him his meal.

"You should eat," Cameron told John. He hadn't moved towards the stew but she could hear the rumbling of his stomach and knew he was hungry.

"You want any?" he asked her. He knew she didn't need to eat but she could do so. He didn't know if she could taste it or anything like that.

"No," Cameron answered simply. She sat in place whilst John got up and moved to the stew pot. Kyle and Allison spoke in hushed whispers and the latter glanced over at John several times. He noticed her looking and figured they were talking about him, though he wasn't fussed what it was about, as long as they weren't planning to turn on them or anything. It looked more like they were debating or arguing something, though he wasn't sure what.

John picked up the ladle and started to scoop the thick liquid into his bowl. He could see now that he was right it not wanting to know what else was in it; it smelt good but it looked disgusting up close.

Allison turned away from Kyle and approached John as he finished filling his bowl. "I wanted to say sorry," Allison said quickly, not at all feeling comfortable with what she was about to say. "For trying to kill you these past few weeks... and for thinking you're some kind of freak – well, you *are* , sort of, because you came through time for that thing-"

"Is there a point to this?" John asked. He didn't want to hear a list of criticisms about him coming to the future for Cameron – if they pulled this off and they got back he was sure he'd get an earful about it from his mom, not that he cared. He'd made the call, he'd dealt with it, and he'd deal with his mom when the time came, too. "I get it," he told her. "I'd have probably thought you were working for Skynet too if you showed up and a few days later a terminator attacks."

"Not just that," Allison said. "When I saw the metal in that coffin I freaked out: I saw the way you stared at me when we had you and I put two and two together and thought the worst about you."

John saw Kyle several feet behind her, talking to Derek and glancing occasionally at him and Allison, and figured he'd put her up to this. Whether it was because of Kyle himself or just trying to smooth things out for the road ahead, he didn't know. "I used to live in Palmdale," she told John. "My family survived J-Day but two years after the bombs fell and the machines rolled forward, we were attacked."

"Skynet?" John asked.

Allison shook her head. "Tunnel rats: they came up to the surface to scavenge for supplies, and we had a cache of canned food and water – enough to last the four of us for months. They killed my dad, took the food and kidnapped my mom and sister. I hid, and I never

saw either of them again. You've seen any tunnel rats around?" she asked John.

"Yeah," he nodded, thinking back to the derelicts back in the tunnel and the man he'd killed. He'd seen what they did with young girls and started to see what Allison had been afraid of. Chances were her mom and sister had been forced into sexual slavery, and she'd been afraid of him doing the same to her. It seemed far fetched to him, and more than a little insulting, but then again he'd only seen a small portion of what this future was like; she'd lived it all her life.

"People with power take advantage of everyone else," she said. "We realised you were part of this group that was kicking Skynet's ass, making you one of the most powerful people left in the world, and that's what I thought you were gonna do. You've seen what people can do."

John paused as he took it all in. She'd thought he was some kind of perverted sex fiend who was going to use her like a piece of meat. *Bit of a change from being some kind of messiah,* he thought. "All I wanted to do was find Cameron," he told her. "I never even knew who you were; she mentioned an Allison once but I didn't think anything of it until I saw you in the tunnel. I've found Cameron and all I want to do is go home."

Cameron listened in on John and Allison's conversation and watched as he spoke to her, curious.

Savannah beckoned Cameron over to her and Ellison, and she got up and joined the pair of them. She'd noticed that they'd remained separate from Derek's group; they were allied but they weren't friendly. She sat down next to Savannah as she and Ellison spooned the stew into their mouths eagerly.

"Hey, Cameron," Ellison said around a mouthful of food, swallowing it before he continued. "Have you thought about what you're going to do once we go back?"

"Find Danny Dyson," she answered. "Stop Judgement Day." They knew the plan.

"We mean *after* that," Savannah said between mouthfuls. "Let's say we manage to go back, and we stop Skynet; then what?"

"I haven't thought about it," Cameron replied. All she was concerned with was protecting John. As long as she was with him and he was safe, she was content.

"Not sure what I'll do," Savannah sighed.

"John said you're a good fighter," Cameron said to her. "You could join the army."

Savannah shook her head, all she'd ever done in her life was fight. "No, I want to do something else." Once they got back and they'd stopped Skynet she wanted to do something different with her life, not fighting. She didn't know what, though.

"You'll think of something," Ellison said to Savannah. She was resourceful, tough and resilient; if she set her mind to something he knew she'd succeed. He turned to Cameron as he finished off the last of his stew and set the bowl down, content. "You'll need a plan," he said to her. "Even if we stop Skynet you, John and Sarah will still be fugitives; the police and the FBI won't stop searching for you."

"That won't be a problem," Cameron smiled slightly. Her experiences with John Henry, his memories which were now her own, and her newly acquired capacity to wirelessly access machines opened up a number of possibilities. She could easily make her, John and Sarah disappear permanently.

Derek stood up from his spot on the floor and the chatter amongst those eating quickly faded into silence. "I want to make sure everyone knows the score," he pointed to John, still talking to Allison. He and John had spent a lot of time hammering out a plan together, trying to work out the best way they could actually achieve this thing.

"We can't stay here," he told them. "And recent events mean our plan to head south is now impossible."

John stood up, knowing he should explain it as well, since it was his, Ellison's and Savannah's plan. Well, their plan, anyway.

Before he could say anything Michelle glared at John and then Derek. "Why the hell are we listening to this little bastard, Reese? He's the reason we're so screwed."

"Because we can take you somewhere safe," John answered her simply.

"You're talking about breaking into Serrano Point," a long haired, scraggly fighter in his thirties commented. "That's a goddamn suicide mission."

"We don't have any other choice," John told them. He gestured to Cameron. "Cameron can help us; she can hack into the plant and scramble its security systems. And she's got two-dozen endos under her control; they'll provide a distraction while we infiltrate the plant."

The same long haired fighter looked at John, then Cameron, and his brow furrowed. "I don't know: working with one metal's bad enough, now you're saying we gotta trust a whole bunch of tin cans? What if they turn on us?"

"I trust Cameron more than anyone else here," John snapped back. He didn't have to worry about Cameron putting a bullet in his back or taking out one of Derek's men because she didn't like them. He couldn't say the same for any of Derek's group; he knew any of them would gladly blow Cameron away if they thought they could get away with it.

"Question," Kyle raised his hand politely, also trying to change the subject away from whether or not they should be working with machines. "If Cameron can do all that why can't she reroute the power from here?"

"Don't call it that," Allison whispered irritably into his ear. It wasn't human, it shouldn't have a name.

Cameron looked to him but didn't stand up. She ignored Allison's comment. She didn't care what Allison said about her and she didn't want to cause further tension between the two groups. "I can but Skynet will stop it," she told Kyle. "We have to stop them from manually diverting the power." It was high risk but she calculated the odds of success from what she knew of Serrano Point in her timeline, and it had a much better chance than Derek's plan of hiding in the south. She decided not to mention that she expected heavy casualties.

All of Derek's crew stared at Cameron as she spoke. They didn't want to hear anything a metal had to say, though Derek grudgingly had to admit she had a point.

"Putting it simply: we head as far north as we can underground until we leave LA County, head northwest up to Serrano Point, one-hundred-and-sixty miles away; the metal reroutes the power, we make sure the machines can't take control back quickly, then haul ass as fast as we can back here, get to the Downtown basement where we found Connor, and go through back to the past. If it works then in a week's time we'll be eating hot dogs and drinking beer back in 2009."

Derek tapped the side of a metal barrel beside him. "Help yourselves," he told everyone. He turned to John and quietly said, "Moonshine: we brewed it a while ago and kept it for a special occasion; might as well drink it down tonight." Derek took his canteen mug and poured himself a large helping, followed by the others. John turned away from it and went back to Cameron, Ellison and Savannah as Derek's group got stuck into the homemade alcohol. He could see their point; given the danger of the mission this could well be their last ever meal; they might as well make the most of it.

"You're all welcome to have a drink if you like," John told them. "But I'm not. I want to keep a clear head for tomorrow." Ellison declined, thinking the same as John.

Savannah looked at the barrel and the people milling around it, swilling booze down their necks. "Fuck it," she said as she got up and joined the queue for the moonshine. She'd had a really shitty last few days since she'd set eyes on the liquid metal bitch; she could use a drink. It didn't take long before she was at the front and she filled her mug to the top. She pulled it up to her lips and took a long swig; the probably-wood alcohol burned its way over her tongue and down her throat, leaving a warm, bitter sensation in her mouth. She took another deep swig; it tasted like crap but hopefully it would do the job.

"Take it steady," a tall, slender fighter with long, curly hair, piercing blue eyes and a slightly crooked nose said to her with a slight grin on his face. "That stuff's strong."

"This?" Savannah lifted her cup as she drained half of it down her throat. "I'd have to drink half the barrel to even feel it."

As she took another sip the fighter said something to her, but she just nodded, not really paying attention. She saw Allison and Kyle stood chatting, very close together, and tried to listen in on them.

Allison and Kyle stood together and leaned against a wall, their shoulders just barely touching as they both slowly sipped on their drinks. Kyle gestured with his mug towards John and his group. "What do you make of them?" he asked Allison.

"The old black guy seems okay," she shrugged. He hadn't said much but seemed pretty reasonable when he did speak. "I don't like the girl, and the less said about the metal the better."

"Are you ever gonna let that go?" Kyle asked her. "If we manage to do this and that time machine does what he said, then are you gonna obsess over her once we're back?"

"It. Not 'her'; it."

"It, then," Kyle corrected himself. He looked over and saw John chatting to the machine and Ellison. He looked genuinely happier now; Kyle could see a spark in his eyes whenever he spoke to the machine. It was weird, freaky, and he didn't know what the attraction could be; knowing it was a machine. But whatever; it was Connor's choice and as long as it didn't hurt anyone else it didn't matter: he didn't exactly see them all being drinking buddies once this was all over. "We barely survived hunting Connor; I don't want you risking your neck again because of a grudge. Life's too short."

Kyle leaned into Allison and lowered his head down, brushing his lips lightly against hers. Allison realised he was right; especially in this world, and given the danger they were about to put themselves in. She pulled him closer and deepened the kiss for a second until the sound of wolf-whistles tore the moment from them and they realised they were in public.

"Come on," Allison got up and took Kyle's hand. She led him to the stairs that ran up from the platform to all their quarters. "This could be our last night alive," she told him then planted another kiss on his lips. "Let's make the most of it."

"Break him in easy, Allie; it's his first time!" Laughter erupted from the others at Mac's comment.

"Best ten seconds of your life, Kyle!" Michelle hollered after them.

John watched the banter and couldn't help but smile a little. They were in the shit but they weren't wallowing in it like the tunnel rats; they'd made do as best as they could and the fact anyone could still laugh and joke with the world falling apart around them was nothing short of a miracle in his eyes. It was a huge shock to him seeing Kyle – even though he'd accepted a long time ago that this Kyle wasn't his father – with Allison, rather than his mom. He couldn't help but think she'd have something to say about the one person she'd ever really loved sneaking off alone with a Cameron lookalike.

Cameron caught John staring at Kyle and Allison disappearing up the stairs together like teenagers at a house party. John had spoken to Allison for several minutes, although she hadn't been able to hear all of the conversation because of background noise from the other people around talking much louder. She'd heard Allison apologise to John, and his acceptance of it, but little after that. She also saw how John watched the others, drinking and laughing together. He was always the outsider, he never joined in. She knew that of John. "Do you want to be with them?" she asked John. "With people, with Allison?"

John coughed in shock at her question; he hadn't been expecting that at all. *"God, no,"* John blurted out as he cleared his throat. "Cameron: they kept me prisoner and Allison nearly fed me to her dog. There's no way I'd want to stay with her, or them."

"Kyle's your father," Cameron said.

"How'd you know that?" John stared at her quizzically. "I never told you that before." That had always been his most guarded secret; his mom had drilled it into him never to tell anyone.

"You did," she replied knowingly. John caught on to what she meant; his future self had confided in her. She'd told him before they talked a lot in the future. He couldn't help but think he'd heard something in her voice, similar to whenever she'd spoken about Riley. Could she be jealous, of something that didn't exist, even?

"I'm not interested in her," John said, "at all. I'm happy for Kyle," he shrugged. He wouldn't say these people meant nothing to him, but they weren't his family by a long shot. He wouldn't have chased any of them through time to find them.

"Looks like love is in the air," Ellison pointed to Savannah. The blonde guy was still chatting her up and stepping closer and closer until his body was inches from hers. He leaned in for a kiss but Savannah swiftly pulled away and kneed him hard in the balls, doubling him over. He let out an agonised groan as pain racked his

body. John felt his own testicles ache in sympathy for the guy; he'd been on the receiving end of Savannah's ball-breaking knee once before.

"Maybe not," Cameron said as Savannah shoved the guy to the floor and the scene seemed to freeze. Everyone stared at Savannah for a second, completely silent. John felt an instant tension as all eyes fell on the redhead. Had she just ruined their alliance before it had even started?

"You fucking idiot, Cooper," Michelle laughed at her downed comrade and seconds later the chatter went back to normal; the incident forgotten.

Savannah came back to Ellison, John and Cameron, and crouched down on one knee, swaying slightly as she sipped on her third mug of moonshine. Contrary to her earlier boast it was definitely starting to take effect.

"What was that about?" Ellison asked her. Though he thought he could guess. Since he'd taken her back from the Mexican soldiers she'd shacked up with she hadn't once gotten close to anyone. She never normally drank, either. Not until now, and he knew it was no coincidence it came only days after seeing Weaver again.

"Came up with some crap about how it might be our last night on earth and we should make the most of it," Savannah said bluntly. The same shit she'd heard Kyle and Allison spout before they'd rushed off upstairs.

John got up to his feet, as did Cameron. "I'd rather make sure this *isn't* our last night on earth," he said. "So I'm getting an early night." John started towards the stairs that would take him up to the offices and small stores, hoping to find a vacant one he could set up in and get some sleep. He had a feeling the party down here would go on for quite some time. Cameron followed, as did Ellison.

"I'm gonna stay a while, I think," Savannah told them. She wasn't anywhere near drunk enough yet."

"Have fun," Ellison told her. He'd learnt long ago that nothing would stop her once she made her mind up, and knew she could take care of herself.

John turned to Derek just before he started up the steps. "Nine a.m. tomorrow," he nodded to Derek, stood beside Mac and another fighter in the middle of an arm wrestling competition. Savannah watched with interest and nominated herself to take on the winner.

"We'll be ready," Derek tilted his mug at John.

John quickly made his way up the stairs, taking two steps at a time as Cameron kept stride with him and Ellison behind them. Drunken shouts and cheers flowed through the air as one of the two competitors finished the other one off.

"I hope so," John breathed out a quiet reply to Derek. "I really hope so."

Up the stairs they found a corridor with a series of doors on each side. What used to be offices and utility rooms, Derek had told John. They were now living quarters, and because of the group's depleted number they had plenty of space, and he'd told John to pick out a vacant one to sleep in. John didn't really like the idea of sharing rooms with Derek and his men; he was still uneasy around them.

John reached for the handle of one door but Cameron shot out her hand and grasped his wrist, pulling his hand away. "Not that one," she told him. Allison and Kyle were in that room. "Trust me," she said. She could hear everything happening behind the door.

She led them to a vacant room at the opposite end from Kyle and Allison, and led them in. She'd placed their packs in this room before. John straightened out his roll mat and pulled the sleeping bag out of his pack as Ellison did the same to his own rucksack and

then pulled out Savannah's sleeping gear, ready for her to get into when she returned.

"She'll be too drunk to do it herself when she gets back," Ellison said to John.

"Does she get drunk a lot?" John asked him.

"She used to," Ellison replied, thinking back sadly to when he'd found her shacked up with the soldiers. She'd been hooked on alcohol and drugs and it had taken him months to nurse her back to full health. She hadn't touched anything since then. "Weaver's really gotten to her," he said almost apologetically.

"Is she going to be okay?" Cameron asked. She liked Savannah. She now had all of John Henry's memories and was surprised at the stark contrast between Savannah as a little girl and her now. Savannah reminded Cameron slightly of Sarah Connor, and she was curious about her. At the same time she found herself inexplicably concerned for Savannah's wellbeing.

John took off his thick coat and thermal sweater underneath, and pulled his boots off. He slipped into his sleeping bag as exhaustion got the better of him, and zipped it up, wrapping himself in a warm, comfy cocoon as Ellison did the same and lay down.

John closed his eyes and lay back as Cameron sat up beside him. "Lay down," he told her. "It's weird you sitting up like that. Cameron complied and lay down close beside him.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much," he smiled, his face partly obscured by the sleeping bag. He wanted to stay up and talk to Cameron but he was so exhausted, having barely slept in days, always being on the move, that he just didn't have the energy. "Thanks," he mumbled, slurring slightly, already starting to succumb to exhaustion. He couldn't keep his eyes open anymore.

"For what?" Cameron asked.

John mumbled something unintelligible and she couldn't understand a single syllable of his speech. He shifted in his sleeping bag and rolled slightly until he was leaning against Cameron and his head was nuzzled into her neck. She could feel his pulse slowing down, as was his breathing. He was already asleep. He unconsciously mumbled something else again and this time Cameron understood one single word he said: her name. She reached her arm around him and wrapped it around his shoulders, edging him towards her so he was in a more comfortable position and wouldn't wake up with a sore neck.

She liked the close proximity they shared and the trust he now had in her. They were closer than they had been before and Cameron wanted that to continue. She looked at John, sound asleep and leaning into her. She was more content than she had ever been before now she was back with John, and Cameron resolved she would do anything and everything to ensure it remained that way.

Chapter 17

John groaned slightly at the immense weight bearing down uncomfortably on his shoulders and back. He'd stripped down his rucksack and packed only the barest essentials: sleeping bag and roll mat, a week's worth of food and water, medical pack, Semtex, ten magazines for the HK417 and a bandolier of spare ammunition for the AA-12, plus grenades. It still added up to over sixty pounds in weight, plus his weapons. All the others were similarly laden down, and most of the others also had shovels, poles, ponchos and camouflage netting. Cameron had taken more than her fair share of the weight and was carrying over 200lbs on her back, including a large jerry can full of spare water, but the weight of their equipment was still a hefty burden on each of them.

Still, John thought to himself as he marched down the Metrorail tunnel alongside Cameron. *It could be worse.* John looked around at the others marching and noticed only he, Cameron, and Ellison weren't bleary-eyed and hanging by a thread. Mac was on point, so he couldn't see the large man's face but he looked back at Derek and saw the bloodshot eyes, the purple circles that hollowed his cheeks, and the fact he looked even paler than he had before.

Savannah marched past Derek, looking the most dishevelled out of the entire group. Her red hair was an utter mess and the bags under her eyes were twice the size of anyone else's.

"Heavy night, was it?" John asked.

"I never want to drink again," she groaned weakly.

"I thought you said it wouldn't affect you," John smirked.

"To be fair, she drank twice as much as anyone else," Derek commented. He would never have believed the small red haired girl, only a few years older than John by the looks of it, had drank the entire camp under the table, including him and Mac. She'd been the only one able to stand – if only barely – by the time the barrel had run dry.

"You should be dead," Cameron told Savannah. She'd tasted a sample of the moonshine in the morning – just the few drops left – and analysed it out of curiosity: it was much stronger than any drink brewed before Judgement Day, and more than the wood alcohol John treated his soldiers to in her future, and Savannah had drank copious amounts of it.

"I feel dead," Savannah replied. She'd never had a hangover like this before; her skull was being split in two by an imaginary axe that she couldn't pull out, and her mouth and throat were parched. She pulled open a canteen and put it up to her lips. She swirled the first mouthful around, wetting her tongue and gums and trying to make her mouth feel less like a desert, then spat it out on the ground. She took several long gulps before her thirst was at least somewhat quenched.

"It's what you get," Ellison told Savannah, stepping past Derek and matching her stride. "I've told you before; nothing's without a consequence."

"I know," Savannah sighed. Ellison didn't press it any further. He knew the searing hangover would be lesson enough, and both of them knew it wasn't a habit of hers; she rarely touched a drop anymore – ever the wary, watchful professional – but seeing Weaver again had driven her to it. She'd needed something to make her forget, even if only for a few hours.

After the others had gone to bed things got a little blurry, and she couldn't remember leaving the party at all. She'd just woken up in the same room as John, Cameron and Ellison, with no clue how she'd gotten there.

John felt a lot better now that everyone else was hung over and looking like zombies from Night of the Living Dead; he'd slept pretty well last night and felt fresh as a daisy compared to most of the others.

He looked back and saw Allison and Kyle marching together, chattering quietly between them. They both looked hung over too, though not as badly as the others. He reckoned they'd rejoined the party sometime after he'd gone to bed. Still, the group was in a terrible state; if they got attacked by machines now they'd last barely a minute.

John hung back a little and marched alongside Derek, and Cameron followed suit. "Have you got the map?" he asked. Derek nodded and pulled out a map of California. He handed it to John, who partially unfolded it.

Cameron looked at the map, quickly located Zieracorp's position and that of Serrano Point, took in the scale marker and made a quick calculation. "One-hundred-and-sixty-two miles," she told them.

"As the crow flies," Derek replied. "More like two-hundred going underground until we're clear of LA County."

John and Derek had gone over the plan before and agreed that Derek would lead the way through LA County; he knew the area and how to move around better underground.

"Where are we now?" John asked, looking down at the map. He wasn't used to travelling underground like this.

"Coming up on Hollywood and Vine," Derek said. He took the map back and looked just to make sure. He knew the tunnels pretty well but it never hurt to be too careful. "Once we hit North Hollywood station there's service tunnels that lead into an old line that hasn't been used in over fifty years. It heads north to San Fernando."

John looked down at the map, at where Derek's finger was pointing. "We head northwest," he said, running his own index finger in up from San Fernando, northeast in a curve that ran through the Angeles National Forest, between Santa Clarita and Palmdale, before curling west towards Los Padres Forest.

Derek shook his head. "No, that'll add another day to the hike."

Cameron looked at the map for a split second. "John's right," she countered. She pointed to a small airport on the map to the west of San Fernando. Any airport left functional would be likely to house a number of HKs: Skynet tended to repurpose existing airfields and after her and John Henry's UCAV attacks, many of the HKs from LAX and other large airports in the area would have dispersed to smaller ones to preserve Skynet's forces. She pointed to the airport on the map. "John's plan is good; the route is remote." And to Cameron, remote meant safer: the chance of being seen by machine patrols in the wilderness was much less than by taking the more direct route. This mission was already extremely dangerous; she wouldn't risk John any more than was necessary.

John pulled a radio out from his pocket and switched it on. He'd already matched the frequency to the one they'd left with Weaver. "Weaver, come in," he spoke into it as he pressed the com button. There was no response, not even static on the other end. "Weaver?" John looked at the thing and tried to work out what was wrong.

"Here," Cameron held out her hand for it, and John gave it to her. She pulled out a crank from the back and wound it around in circles, going faster and faster and letting out a high pitched tearing sound. "Batteries would have degraded beyond use," she said as she handed the now fully charged radio back to John. "People have to rely on windup radios."

"That's one of the biggest problems we had for years," Derek added. "We had a lot of equipment but batteries ran out and we had to throw stuff away.

"Thanks," John smiled at Cameron as he switched it on again and this time was rewarded with a faint hum. "Weaver, are you there?"

Weaver crouched down in front of the electromagnet she and Cameron had unearthed, and inspected the cover panel at the front, a few inches above the ground. The panel was a square sheet of iron, four inches by six, and connected by four screws in each of the corners. Weaver's forefingers turned silver, elongated to twice their usual length, and grew thinner; tapering down into a tiny screwdriver head at the end. She jammed them into the screws and turned them round, twisting her arms into a coil as she worked them loose. When the first two screws were undone she started on the bottom two, and within seconds had made short work of them.

Her fingers morphed back into normal shape and she pulled the panel free, revealing a number of switched and electrical ports. Weaver had anticipated that she'd need to make alterations to the TDE and had designed it with that in mind. The time displacement equipment she'd created was built to run on a vast amount of electricity flowing through it at once; taking advantage of the massive power infrastructure available in the past. Now she had to recalibrate circuitry and equipment to build up the power in a buffer, as Serrano Point alone was insufficient. If they operated the machine as it was now it would simply attempt to form a sphere, which would quickly dissipate after a few seconds without enough power to sustain it.

Weaver connected a USB line into one of the ports and hooked up the other end to the laptop she'd stored inside the walls. She'd stored a number of spare batteries so time wasn't a concern for her. She could also run the laptop off the power that would flow from Serrano Point when John and Cameron completed their mission.

She started typing rapidly at the laptop's keyboard and worked quickly and diligently on reprogramming the power distribution systems.

"Weaver, are you there?" She turned her head towards the radio as John's voice crackled several feet away on the ground. If she were human she might have sighed or rolled her eyes in annoyance at the disruption to her work. She extended her arm out, stretching it across the room, and reached out for it. She brought it back towards her and pressed down on the com button.

"Yes," she said curtly.

"How's the TDE going?" John asked.

"Slowly," Weaver answered. "It would go much faster if I wasn't interrupted."

"I wanted to tell you we've set out; we're in West Hollywood now and should be out of LA County in the next ten to twelve hours."

"Very well," Weaver simply replied. She didn't understand why he needed to know her progress: she didn't need to sleep and could work continuously. She'd have completed the TDE alterations before they reached Serrano Point.

"We'll be in touch," John said; a moment later the radio went dead and pure static crackled until Weaver switched the device off and continued with her work on the laptop.

She wasn't pleased by current events: her plans had been ruined by John and Cameron, and she fully intended that the latter would continue John Henry's duties once they returned to the past. If they succeeded in eliminating John Henry's 'brother' then it would still be Cameron's responsibility to ensure no other AIs emerged to threaten the world, and Weaver would make sure that she fulfilled her new role. She knew John Henry's capabilities and that Cameron was capable of much more than the simple protection of one single human. She knew Cameron would object to being separated from John but it was her intention that John-Connor-the-saviour-of-the-human-race would never be necessary and Cameron would see that

her mission to protect John was no longer valid. Machines like herself and Cameron were meant for much greater things.

John and Cameron silently led the group through the twisted landscape of Angeles National Forest. They were spread out and all moved quickly and quietly, with barely a word being spoken and none above a low murmur. John could only describe the scenery around them as disturbing, to say the least.

The forest, once a vast green wilderness, had been completely changed by Judgement Day: miles and miles of dead trees littered the landscape as far as John could see. Greenery had been replaced by millions of dead trunks, twisted and lurching from the blast waves of Skynet's nuclear attack. Branches reached out like malevolent arms attempting to snare unfortunate victims. And most disturbing of all, John found, was the total silence of the forest. There were no birds, no animals; nothing. The forest, like most of this world he'd seen, was completely dead.

"This place is the second creepiest thing I've ever seen in my life," Allison said quietly to Kyle as they passed under a large redwood leaning diagonally over them almost to the point of collapse. Its branches hung down and extended out, brushing the tops of the taller fighters' heads as they passed under the foreboding threshold. She was glad that Cassie was with her; she'd pick out any machines and hopefully give them some warning if any tin cans were nearby.

"What's the first?" Kyle asked, already suspecting what her answer would be.

"That," Allison pointed at Cameron up front, marching several yards in front of her. She unconsciously fingered the trigger of her assault rifle as she looked at the machine. She felt cold steel press against the back of her neck and a shiver ran down her spine.

"You talk too much," Savannah said quietly as she prodded her rifle against the back of Allison's neck, ignoring Cassie's growling at her. "And Weaver's the creepiest thing by far."

"Can't argue with that," Kyle shrugged. That liquid metal had been the strangest thing he'd ever seen in his life: a machine that could change shape at will, imitate anyone or anything, form any shape and even become part of the walls and ceiling. It was so cold – even for a machine, so *alien.* He wouldn't have been surprised if Connor told him it came from outer space or something. It was so freakish he reckoned it would feel well at home in this nightmarish forest.

"Are you always this hostile?" Allison asked Savannah as the redhead lowered her rifle from the back of her neck.

"Only to people I don't trust," Savannah replied curtly.

"I really don't like you," Allison breathed. She ignored Savannah and watched Kyle out of the corner of her eye, remembering the night before she couldn't help but grin a little. She'd been a little nervous, as had Kyle, but she'd enjoyed it and they'd spent almost the whole night up together afterwards. She'd never done that with anyone but Kyle; it had been special. She looked forward to going back in time and seeing how things would go with Kyle without living in constant fear. They'd talked about it; what they'd do together when they went back.

"You owe me a date, remember," she slyly reminded Kyle.

"Soon as we're back and we've got Skynet by the balls, I'll take you out to see a movie," Kyle smiled at her. Not that he remembered anything about what movies had been out in the theatres back then.

"And dinner," Allison added. She had a feeling that after a lifetime of eating scraps, garbage and rodents, she was going to get very, very fat after they got back.

"Mmm," Kyle started to fantasise already about dinner, about eating real food for the first time in almost two decades. "Steak sounds good to me."

"Then we can have desert," Allison licked her lips sensually at Kyle, flashing him a mischievous grin. Kyle nodded enthusiastically: he liked the sound of that. He really couldn't wait until they were back from the future.

They continued on, mostly silent for several more miles, past untold more twisted dead trees that rose out of the ground like the hands of the dead buried below. The mass of trees grew even thicker, denser, and before long it became impossible to move without feeling the twigs and branches scratching against their skin, clothes and packs. To John it felt more and more like something out of a horror movie with every step, except the monsters in this would be metal and *very* real.

As the sun started to descend in the sky and the already feeble light faded even further, the entire forest became covered in the looming shadows of the trees, casting jagged black patterns everywhere.

Ellison marched out to the left of the group, keeping his eyes peeled for any threats from the side. He looked out into the mass of shadows being cast and blending in with the darkness from the rapidly approaching dusk, trying to make out anything that didn't belong. Anything shining, too straight or too curved, or any signs of movement.

He saw something out the corner of his eye, a faint fleck of white sticking out from the base of a thick redwood tree.

"I see something," he spoke out, straining his eyes in the fading light to make out what it was. He couldn't tell.

John and Cameron at the front both stopped and held their flat palms out beside their heads, signalling the rest of the group to stop. "Take cover," John hissed at them. The group dispersed and set

themselves up behind trees, shrugging off their packs and taking aim with their weapons as they formed a rough defensive circle, all of them facing outwards.

"Cameron, Ellison, with me. Everyone else hold here." The three of them jogged through the trees, letting Ellison lead the way. When they were a few feet away, their view of whatever it was still blocked by the massive redwood, they slowed down and split up – Ellison taking the right side and Cameron and John to the left. They all aimed their weapons as they slowly sidestepped around the tree, ready to shoot whatever they saw if they had to.

Ellison gasped as they saw what it was. John frowned and grit his teeth, and even Cameron's eyes widened slightly as all three of them took in the grisly sight before them.

Four skeletons lay on the ground behind the tree. Human ones; two adults and two children, John judged from the size of them, looking like they'd been there for years. A small plastic doll sat on the ground, inches away from one of the children's bony hands. The two juvenile corpses were covered by the older ones, their arms stretched across the smaller bodies.

"They were trying to protect their children," Cameron observed. Again she found herself identifying with these long dead humans, dying to protect their offspring. She knelt down besides the bodies and picked up one of the children's skulls, inspecting it carefully. On its forehead was a perfectly circular hole two centimetres in diameter, and she could see the ground out through the back. She turned it over and saw the back of the skull had an identical hole. The edges of both entry and exit wounds were smooth; there were no jagged fragments of bone and there were no shards nearby.

"They were shot with plasma rifles," she concluded from her study. The superheated gas had melted the surrounding bone on contact, causing the edges to run smooth. The killings were too clean and precise to be human. "Machines did this," she told them.

Ellison shook his head at the sight of it. They might have been killed a year ago or ten, he didn't know. But it was still completely wrong. Parents and their children, a family, murdered. "They weren't a threat," he said to no one in particular.

"Skynet sees all people as a threat," Cameron reminded him. "Children grow up, fight back." She saw the look on Ellison's face and realised what she'd just said could have been wrong. Not factually wrong, because she knew she was correct, but she considered that people took particular offence to the killing of children. "That's why we're going to stop Skynet," she added, placating Ellison slightly. She wouldn't have killed children; they were no threat.

John looked all around, suddenly feeling very exposed despite the mass of trees all around them. He'd thought the forests would provide some cover from the machines; that they'd have stuck to the cities and left the wilderness alone, mostly. The same forestry that could give them cover could also hide machines that could be watching them right now.

"We should get out of here," John said to them. If machines had been through here then it meant chances were they patrolled the forests regularly. He didn't want to get caught out if they came back.

They jogged back to the rest of the group, who were waiting in silence for them. "We're moving on," John told them as Cameron helped him on with his pack once more. He heaved and grunted as the strain once again returned to his back and shoulders.

"What was it?" Mac asked as he heaved his own pack on again. The others all followed suit quickly.

"Bodies," Cameron told him. "Killed by machines."

"A family; they were hunted down and slaughtered," Ellison added with distaste.

"Goddamn machines," Derek sighed.

"Let's go," John said again. He started marching forward, leading by example. Cameron fell in beside him and matched his stride.

"Good idea," Kyle nodded, agreeing completely. "This place really freaks me out." The sooner they were out of this forest the better, as far as he was concerned.

They continued on the march again through the forest and spread themselves out so they couldn't all be taken out by a single shot. They all kept their eyes and ears that much more open now they'd seen evidence of the machines out here. It didn't matter that it happened long ago; chances were machines still stalked the woods, looking for people who'd fled the cities and gone into hiding.

Allison watched out to the right of Kyle, keeping her M4 clutched tightly to her chest and swivelling her head, looking out for any signs of machines. She realised she'd been wrong: the forest had definitely overtaken Cameron as the creepiest thing she'd ever seen in her life, if only barely.

A faint squealing sound in the distance caught Allison's attention and her heart skipped a beat. She wished it could have stayed silent; it was eerie but still held some comfort. Noise meant something was coming. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Kyle asked. He narrowed his eyes and looked around, expecting to see something approaching.

"I can hear something up ahead," Allison said, fear creeping into her voice.

"Maybe it's the bogeyman," Savannah rolled her eyes.

"Shut up," Derek snapped at the pair of them. "If metal was coming Cassie would be going nuts," he reminded them. The Alsatian was still walking by Allison's side, ever watchful.

"I hear it too," Cameron said. Her enhanced hearing picked up the sound and she knew instantly what it was. She increased her pace and put herself in front of John as she estimated the distance to the sound: five hundred and eighty metres away.

"Stop," John held his hand out again and everyone else stopped. Nobody had actually put John in charge; he'd never said he was, even to Savannah and Ellison. He was just doing what needed to be done, and they'd followed him. Since he'd promised Derek and the others the chance to go back, they'd fallen in and somehow he'd become the de facto leader of both groups.

"Stand to," Derek ordered the group. They once again scattered among the trees, crouched on their knees or lay prone with weapons facing in all directions and formed an all round defence as he turned to John and Cameron, the only ones stood up. "What's going on?"

John looked to Cameron, having no idea what it was either. Allison's dog stared forwards at the source of the sound, ears pricked and eyes glued straight ahead, completely alert.

"Skynet transports," Cameron said to both of them and pointed ahead to their half left.

"In the forest?" John asked, confused. How the hell was that possible? He had a vision of Centaurs forging a path through the woods, knocking down trees and crushing them like twigs beneath their giant tracks. If one of those things came towards them they were screwed. He looked to Ellison, the closest of the group to them. "Keep them here," he told the older man. "We're gonna check it out."

Together, John, Cameron and Derek ran forwards and weaved in and out through the trees. Cameron took the lead and led them through, keeping herself in front of John in case anything appeared to attack them. Finally they saw the trees ended at some kind of clearing.

"Get down," Cameron told them quietly. All three of them lay down prone on their stomachs and slowly crawled forwards towards the edge of the clearing. They kept behind the larger, thicker trees and stopped twenty metres away from the last of the trees. The forest abruptly ended and a grass verge ran for ten metres or so towards a multilane tarmac road. A few metres behind that was another tree line, where the forest began again.

Large vehicles rolled down it on multiple sets of large wheels. A mammoth centaur rolled slowly at the front of the convoy, its plasma cannons turned across wide arcs and the machine's 'head' swivelled left and right, searching for targets. Behind it was a vehicle that looked a lot like an armoured personnel carrier, it rolled forward on eight wheels with thick rubber tyres and a turret on top with a pair of large, mean looking plasma cannons. It towed an armoured trailer as long as its own body and slightly higher behind it, mounted with a second plasma weapon that faced the opposite direction.

Behind that were three long vehicles John guessed were carrying cargo. Large armoured cabs, bristling with sensors for autonomous driving, towed gunmetal grey trailers that were at least half again the length of the largest eighteen wheeler semi trucks he'd ever seen in his life. Unlike semis, however, or any other vehicles he'd ever seen, the entire convoy ran almost silently. He didn't hear any engine noise whatsoever, only the faint squealing of tracks and tyres and their crunching over the tarmac road. A second centaur brought up the rear, protecting from any threats that might attack from behind.

"Shit," Derek cursed in a low voice as he watched the convoy slowly trundle along, barely making fifteen miles an hour by his guess.

"You didn't mention this," John muttered to him.

"I didn't *know* about it," Derek replied.

"How the hell didn't you know there was a supply route here?" John asked. He turned to Cameron. "You didn't know about this?"

Cameron shook her head slightly. "I knew Route 14 was here; it's on the map. I didn't know Skynet was using it as a supply route." That was enough for John; he'd learnt not to doubt Cameron anymore. Even if he hadn't over the past few months of his life – not counting time travel - spending a day and a half holding hands with her and letting her guide him through pitch black tunnels underground without a single trip or stumble would have been enough on its own to instil complete trust in her.

They watched and waited as the convoy rolled before them. Something exploded beneath the lead Centaur with a brilliant flash and an eruption of black smoke and metal fragments as its left track was torn apart. The vehicles behind slowed to a halt and the hatches of the armoured personnel carrier opened up before it had even stopped rolling. Endoskeletons emerged out of the rear of the vehicle and from the trailer behind it. They fanned out around the sides of the convoy, encircling it in an all round defensive formation; plasma rifles in each hand all facing outwards as their grinning skull heads swivelled and searched for targets.

"IED," Derek explained. "There're still some guys who try to fight; they usually don't last long though."

"And you never thought about trying to join them?" John asked with accusation in his voice. He couldn't have just looked after his own this whole time. If they failed to prevent all this from happening then he swore he'd do everything he could to give Skynet the fight of a lifetime.

"Not since the last guy who tried to fight Skynet got whacked." Bedell had been their best shot; he doubted this kid would have had any better ideas than the only guy known to have actually put a dent in Skynet's forces.

"We need to go," Cameron told them both. "They might sweep the surrounding forest."

They crawled quickly and quietly away from the clearing and the road, and headed back towards the rest of the group, who were still all stood to and waiting for them to come back. They all fell back into a tight cluster on John, Cameron and Derek. Allison and Cassie were the last to come and John instantly worried about what the dog would do with all the machines less than half a mile away. For now Cassie was quiet but if the tin cans approached she would bark out and give away their position.

"I need you to keep Cassie quiet," John murmured to Allison, not wanting to raise his voice. "Can you do that?"

Allison nodded and knelt down to Cassie. She pulled out a muzzle from her pocket and wrapped it around the dog's mouth, but not without some protest as Cassie tried to back away. When she had it attached she scratched the Alsatian affectionately behind her ear and wrapped her arms around her, kissing the top of her head.

"Looks like you got competition, Kyle," Mac grinned.

"What's going on?" Ellison asked John.

"There's a road up ahead, Skynet supply route as far as we can tell. There's a convoy on it, that's what Allison heard. One of the escorts just ran over a mine and blew its tracks off."

"Stupid metal," Cooper – the blonde fighter Savannah had decked sniggered.

John ignored the comment and continued. "There's twenty or so endos out there and they might come through to clear the area, so we're moving on. Derek: map?"

Derek pulled out his map once more and John looked at the curve of the road by the forest.

"We're here," Cameron helpfully pointed to an exact spot on the map.

"Okay," John said. "The convoy's going southwest to northeast, so we'll turn back a couple miles, head west for five miles then double back: cross the road at night and away from the convoy."

"Sounds like a plan," Kyle nodded as John and Cameron once again took the lead and set the pace, marching away from the clearing. Metal might show up any minute and none of them wanted to be there if and when it did.

Savannah marched just behind Derek, John and Cameron, with Ellison next to him. Something cold and wet struck her in the eye and she blinked irritably. She looked up and a second fat drop of water hit her forehead, followed by even more.

Rain started to fall harder and faster, growing rapidly from a trickle into a downpour, causing a soft, constant and rapid *patter* as the raindrops struck the ground, the dead trees all around, and fell onto the marching fighters' clothes. Savannah's jacket had been waterproof when she'd first got it, but over the years she'd had to stitch up tears and cuts, which degraded its resistance to the elements and allowed a few droplets of water to trickle in and seep through her clothes underneath. The worst part was the drops that ran down her neck, beneath the collar of her coat, and down her back, chilling her spine and causing the occasional shiver in response. "Fucking rain," she sighed irritably.

"I thought you were meant to be tough," Allison glanced at her, unimpressed.

"You want to find out?" Savannah glared at her threateningly, locking eyes with Allison as the two stared each other down. Cassie seemed to get wind of Savannah's hostility and turned round, staring menacingly at the redhead and growling through her muzzle. Savannah rolled her eyes and broke the stare, looking away from her.

The rain continued to pour down, growing thicker and heavier with each passing minute. Within an hour of the first drops falling, the

group found themselves in a monsoon. Sheets of rain hammered down and reduced visibility to only a few feet in front of them. Even Cameron's vision was obscured by the constant droplets striking her eyes. She didn't have an autonomous blink reflex like the humans so instead she had to constantly, wilfully do it. She'd never experienced rain like this before.

"I think Savannah was right," Derek said as his trousers became completely soaked through and water seeped into cracks in his boots, sloshing around his feet with every step he took. "Fucking rain," he repeated her words.

As if the torrential rain alone wasn't enough, ferocious winds started to tear through the forest and buffeted the squad, driving the wind almost horizontally into their faces, almost completely blinding them, howling loudly and whistling between the trees so they couldn't hear a thing either. They struggled against the wind and the rain as their pace slowed down to almost a crawl. The trees, without any leaves, provided no shelter whatsoever.

Finally they reached a clearing and the road came into view. John and Cameron crouched down on their knees and the others followed suit. Cameron swept her eyes across the clearing, scanning the road on either side as far as she could see and the tree line directly opposite for any signs of movement or any objects out of place.

"It's clear," Cameron said loudly to John, having to shout to be heard above the torrential rain and the gale force winds blowing all around them.

John turned round to Derek and the others. "Me and Cameron will go first," he called out to them. "When we're on the other side we'll turn round and cover you. Come in pairs, one at a time." He looked to the group and realised something was wrong.

"Where's Mac?" John shouted out. Derek, Kyle and Allison looked around and realised John was right. But Mac wasn't the only one.

Derek did a quick count and realised that not only Mac, but Michelle, Rogers and Everson were also missing. Kyle reached down to the radio on his vest and pushed down on the com button. "Mac, Michelle, come in?" He waited for a reply but all he heard among the rain and wind was static. "Mac, Michelle, what's your position and situation?" Again they had no reply. Mac had their radio: either the weather was messing with their comms or...

"Fuck!" Derek cursed. He felt himself panicking; they'd already lost so many friends, he couldn't lose anymore. "We gotta go back for them!"

"Screw that!" Savannah shot back. "We push on."

"Hey," Kyle snapped, pointing a finger at her. "They're *our friends.* We're going back to find them."

Allison, Derek, Cooper, the two other fighters – Myers and Torrance – all nodded to each other in silent agreement. "We don't leave our friends behind," Torrance said to Savannah.

"Don't be stupid," she snarled. "We have no idea where the hell they are and we can barely see three feet in front of our faces: how the hell are you gonna find them in this?" This wasn't just a bit of wind and rain; this was a full on fucking storm.

"Why don't we wait here?" Ellison suggested amicably. "They might catch up with us."

John listened to the argument raging back and forth between Savannah and Derek's group; they looked ready to come to blows any second. He looked at his watch: *02:44.* First light was at six-thirty and it they had to be across the main supply route by then and well into the forest on the other side. With all the destruction to Skynet's facilities in LA County caused by Cameron and John Henry he reckoned there would be a lot of traffic coming down the road towards California to repair all the damage and reinforce the ranks. It would be far safer to cross while it was still dark.

"We cross over," John told them all, earning glares from Derek and the others before he decided to continue. "We'll set up camp in the tree line on the other side." He spotted half a signpost on a battered, rusting pole on the other side of the road. It was barely visible in the darkness, with sheets of rain being blown almost sideways by the wind. "There," he pointed to it. "Fifty metres behind the tree line past that sign. First light's at six-thirty and we're moving out at six, with or without you." They couldn't hang around indefinitely, and if they weren't back by then there was a good chance they never would be.

"You're not gonna help us look?" Allison asked him.

John shook his head, feeling like a total bastard. "We need to be across that road by first light or we might never make it."

"They probably fell behind and carried on when we turned north," Cameron told Derek. "Give me the map." Derek stared at her for a moment before John nodded at him and he pulled the map out of his thigh pocket, handing it over a second later to Cameron. She stared down at the large dark green sections representing Angeles National Forest and calculated exactly where they were and where they'd turned north towards the main supply route.

Cameron noticed that there were no marks on the map at all; no notes, dots or lines drawn on it. She'd seen similar tactics employed in her future, passed down by Special Forces soldiers who'd formed the core of TechCom special operations forces and made it mandatory practice for all resistance fighters. If machines ambushed and killed a resistance fighter they could learn nothing from looking at an unmarked map.

She held it out in front of Derek and pointed to their location. Derek pulled out a small thin cylinder of charcoal, tapered down to a point at one end, and handed it to Cameron. He then pulled out a windup flashlight with a red filter over the lens and shined it down onto the map so he could see. Cyborgs might be able to see in the dark but he couldn't.

"Thank you," Cameron said as she took the improvised homemade charcoal pencil and drew a three-sided square on the map. "This is where we saw the convoy," she pointed at the top of the right-hand line. "We turned west here," she pointed to the right angle at the bottom right of the diagram. "If they fell behind and failed to change direction then they're likely here," Cameron drew another line running west from the bottom of her diagram then shaded in the area between it and the state road, having calculated their pace based on the speed the rest of them had been marching and increasing it by ten percent to be safe.

She calculated they could have travelled up to five miles if they'd continued travelling west rather than north.

Derek frowned at the sight of the shaded area as he realised just how far Mac and the others could have gone. "We'd better move fast," he told the others.

"You've got just over three hours," John told him.

Derek turned to Kyle, Allison and the others. Three hours wasn't much time to search the area John's machine had marked out. He wasn't sure he should trust what it said but it made sense and he had nothing else to go on. "Ditch your packs," he told them as he shrugged his own off and placed it behind a large tree, out of sight of anything that might pass by and look out from the road. They couldn't move quickly enough with them.

One by one they shed their packs, dumped them with Derek's, and took off running through the forest, away from the road.

"Good luck," John and Ellison both said at the same time. It took only moments for the last of Derek's men to disappear from sight and John turned back to the road. "Let's get moving," he said to them. Same as before: we cross in pairs."

John and Cameron moved out first, running out from the tree line across the road whilst Ellison and Savannah knelt at the edge of the

woods with their weapons raised, ready to cover them if needed. John felt completely exposed out in the open like this, even at night, and half expected an HK to swoop down and rain plasma down on them. They ran across the lanes of the freeway, reaching the central reservation and passing through to the other side.

Once they were across John and Cameron recessed into the tree line on the other side and covered Savannah and Ellison as they followed suit. They made it across without incident and started into the forest, melting into the mass of trees until they were sure they'd be invisible from anything on the freeway.

They found a spot to set their packs down and Savannah pulled out a large sheet of waterproof canvas, sets of bungee cords and some tent pegs. She connected hooks at the end of the cords into small metallic rings at each corner of the sheet and wrapped the lengths around two trees, looping it around and connecting the other hooks so the cords held fast. She then pulled the canvass taut and pushed the pegs through two rings in the opposite corners to the bungee cord until they were all the way into the ground. The result was a small camouflage coloured shelter, less than eighteen inches high at one end and running diagonally down to the ground. The whole process had taken less than a minute, and Ellison wasn't far behind erecting his own shelter only a foot away from Savannah's and facing in the opposite direction.

"Get in," Savannah told John and Cameron as Ellison finished off his own. "They're big enough for two."

John and Cameron took their packs off and shoved them into the shelter first, and followed after them, keeping their heads underneath the high end. John flattened out his roll mat and laid back on it as the rain pattered away constantly at the canvas just above their faces. John couldn't help but notice how close he and Cameron were laid together; he could feel the heat emanating from her body, even through her soaked clothes. It was a good job, he thought, that she was a cyborg: she was still dressed in the same bullet riddled jacket and jeans she'd worn when she'd given her chip to John Henry;

hardly dressed for the freezing cold of post apocalyptic future LA. He could see the goose bumps starting to pebble up on her skin and knew if she'd been human she'd be shivering terribly by now. Water glistened off her face and dripped off her hair, soaked through completely. She was a complete state, like a drowned rat, and yet John couldn't hep but feel something stirring as their bodies touched.

"Change your socks," Cameron told him.

"They're fine, Cameron."

"Are your feet wet?" she asked. John nodded slightly in reply. "Change them," she said. She'd seen resistance fighters who'd spent a lot of time in wet socks and boots without changing; in the unsanitary conditions of the post Judgement Day future, many of them had suffered what human soldiers referred to as trench foot, causing sores, blisters, and in several cases tissue necrosis and gangrene. Numerous resistance fighters had lost one or both feet because they hadn't changed their socks. She wouldn't allow that to happen to John.

John realised Cameron wasn't going to budge and he knew she had a point really and was just looking out for him. He took his boots off. He tipped them upside down and rainwater fell out, splashing onto the ground outside their shelter. He pulled his socks off and wiggled his toes, shivering as the cold air hit his naked feet. He rummaged through his rucksack and quickly found a spare pair, slipped them on over his feet and pulled his boots back on, laced them up, and then he laid back. He opened his jacket and placed his wet socks under his armpits; something he'd learnt during his jungle training: the body heat would quickly dry them, so they could be replaced when the fresh pair inevitably became wet again.

John pulled his sleeping bag out, taking Cameron's cue about staying dry and warm, and slipped inside it, wrapping it around himself. He looked across and saw Savannah in her own sleeping bag, on her front with her HK-417 beside her. They didn't really need to have anyone standing guard, he knew; Cameron would be able to

hear anything approaching before any of them, no matter how alert they were.

"Are you cold?" Cameron asked him.

"A little," John replied. Now they'd stopped moving he was fairly chilly but between the shelter, the sleeping bag and his cold weather waterproof jacket, he reckoned he'd be okay.

Cameron unzipped the sleeping bag and manoeuvred herself until she was pressed right up against John and sealed the bag again with both of them inside. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and hugged him tightly, meshing their bodies together so she could share her body heat with him.

She'd moved too fast for John to react, and now he was completely stumped as to how he should as he felt himself stirring once more, hoping in vain that she wouldn't notice. "I'm not that cold," he said meekly to her.

"You can't be too careful," she replied simply. She could feel his pulse and skin temperature as she held him in embrace and noticed his heartbeat had become erratic. She knew why. As they lay there together in silence she felt his pulse steadying, lowering down until it was slightly below his normal level. She could hear the muscles of his heart beating, pumping the blood around his body, and could feel it through his chest. She liked it; she found it reassuring.

A jet engine whined faintly in the distance and John shot his eyes open at the sound, sliding his hand towards his rifle.

"Its seven miles away, flying southeast – away from us," Cameron told him, able to estimate its distance, bearing and trajectory based on what she could hear. Still, John was worried.

"Can't they see us if they fly over? They have infrared, right?"

"These canvasses reflect infrared," Ellison said to him. "We're invisible under these things." Well, from above at least, he thought. But Cameron could give them plenty of warning if there were any ground patrols nearby.

"Good to know," John sighed as he closed his eyes again and tried to relax as much as he could, being out in the unknown wilderness with Derek and his squad out there, and half of them missing. Strangely, with Cameron snuggled up to him, he didn't find it that difficult.

Chapter 18

Allison grit her teeth as she pushed forward and held her hand in front of her to shield her eyes from the freezing, biting wind being blasted into her face. The wind had gotten even worse and was hurling the rain at her so hard her skin was starting to sting from the impact. They marched straight into the harsh elements, slowing their progress down to little more than a crawl and reducing their visibility to only a few feet in front of them.

"This is shit," Allison shouted out in frustration, thinking Savannah might have had a point: *'fucking rain' indeed.*

Kyle nodded to her but pushed onwards, trying to ignore the constant lashing that stung his face like a swarm of bees. Every inch of exposed skin burned from the cold and the biting rain – it felt more like hailstones than raindrops. Thunder boomed in the distance and lightning crackled across the sky, lighting up the air and illuminating the forest for a fraction of a second. All he could see was more dead trees ahead of them. They'd split up into pairs to search a wider area and had been blundering almost blindly through the forest for hours without a trace of them.

He put his hand on Allison's shoulder and gripped lightly, pausing her in her tracks. "Stop a second," he had to shout at her to be heard above the howling wind and the thunder.

Allison knew what he wanted and nodded in understanding. The pair of them knelt down and huddled together, trying to shield themselves from the rain as Kyle pulled the radio out from his pouch. "Mac, come in," he called out. "Mac, are you there? Over." For the umpteenth time he got no reply, only static, punctuated by the raindrops tapping against the worn plastic. "Mac: *where the hell are you?"* He turned to Allison and looked down at Cassie, still by her

side. "What about her?" he asked. "She tracked Connor's scent for weeks; she's gotta pick up something."

Allison looked down at Cassie, seeing the dog look confused as they were, and shook her head at Kyle. "We didn't have all this wind and rain then; she can't track anything in this."

They continued on and pushed through the pouring, stinging rain. The weather was their biggest enemy, having already split up their group, and it wasn't showing any signs of easing anytime soon.

After more endless marching Cassie perked up; her ears pricked and she stood alert with eyes wide open and focused. "What is it, girl?" Allison asked her, feeling a chill down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold, the wind or the rain; Cassie had spotted something. She shouldered her weapon and looked around, dreading to see a metal skull grinning at her and Kyle through the trees. There was nothing. Nothing leapt out at them and no plasma blasts burst through the forest.

Allison looked closer at Cassie, trying to figure out what was up with her, when she saw her nostrils flaring rapidly. "Have you got a scent?" she wondered.

"She's got a whiff of something," Kyle pointed out, noticing Cassie's nose working overtime.

This could be it, Allison thought excitedly. She knelt down and pulled off Cassie's muzzle. "Cassie: *search!"* Cassie let out a long, low growl and suddenly tore through the woods.

"Come on!" Kyle took off running after Cassie and Allison dashed after a split second later, catching up to Kyle quickly. The pair of them pushed themselves as hard and as fast as they could to keep Cassie in sight; if they lost her then they really were screwed. Allison swore as she pushed through low branches that scratched her face and tore at her coat. Several times she caught her hair on a branch and bunches of strands were torn from her scalp, causing her to tear

up slightly in pain, but she ignored it as best she could and carried on.

Cassie finally slowed down to a halt in a slightly more open area – like an eye in a storm, where the trees were a lot sparser. She stared at the scene before her and growled warily.

"What the hell?" Allison breathed; her eyes wide open like saucers and her mouth agape at the sight Cassie had led them to. Shell casings littered the ground all around them and a number of trees bore scorch marks and deep black wounds. A few had even toppled over, their trunks severed by plasma fire. That wasn't the worst, however: the forest floor was covered in dark crimson bloodstains and splashes. Pieces of blackened, charred skin and a few black glassy curved fragments lay on the ground – bone, as best as Kyle could guess. It was definitely recent as it hadn't yet soaked up into the soil, though the blood had become fairly watered down with the rain falling down on it.

He knelt down and picked up a couple of shell casings in each hand. He took out a windup torch and turned it on, shining the red filtered beam onto his hand as he held the casings close to his face and inspected them. "Five-five-sixes and seven-six-twos," he said to Allison.

"Mac had the other plasma rifle," she commented.

"But Michelle and the rest had M4s and an AK," Kyle replied. He flashed his light down and swept it across the ground, illuminating all the shell casings and making a rough count. He reckoned there were over a hundred rounds scattered on the forest floor, most were concentrated around a pair of large, felled sequoia trees perhaps twenty feet from the bloodstains on the ground. Their trunks had been cut at chest height and were covered in plasma burns and scorch marks. "One of them was hit," he told her. "The others took cover behind these trees." There was no more blood behind the sequoias so he didn't know what happened to the others.

"Cassie: search," Kyle commanded again. Cassie looked to Kyle and sniffed the air and the ground, then lay down on her stomach and looked up to Allison.

"It's no good," Allison said sadly. "Either she's lost the scent or this is as far as it goes. Do you think the others might have gotten away?"

"I don't know," Kyle wished he did. He wanted at least some of them to have made it, but there was no sign of them and if Cassie couldn't track them then he had no idea how they were meant to.

Allison brought her left wrist close to her face and pulled her jacket sleeve up so she could see the windup watch Kyle and Derek had given her years ago, and strained to see what it said in the darkness. Lightning crackled again and she got a quick glimpse. *05:26.*

"We've gotta go," she shouted.

"What?" Kyle stared at her as if she'd grown horns. "We don't leave our friends behind; that's what separates us from Connor and the tin cans." Looking at the scene in front of them he was pretty sure that they'd all been killed by machines but until they knew he didn't want to just leave if there was any chance they were still alive and needed help.

Allison hated herself for even saying it because she agreed with Kyle; she *wanted* to carry on looking for Mac and the others, but time was running out. She thrust her wristwatch in front of Kyle's face. "We've got just over thirty minutes; if we don't head back now Connor and his tin can are gonna leave us behind."

Kyle stared hesitantly at Allison and then the radio, stricken with indecision. He didn't know if he could ever forgive himself for leaving them behind, but if they didn't then nobody would get to go back. He switched his radio channel and pressed the com button again. "Derek: we've got something. We found evidence of a firefight; shell casings and some blood: at least one of them was hit. No sign of them after that."

Derek's voice crackled out, distorted by the storm interfering with the signal. *"I'm calling this: we gotta abort and head back to Connor."*

Kyle sighed regretfully and shook his head in dismay. "Understood; we're heading back." They were all but condemning their missing friends to death out here; this was the worst weather he'd seen in over five years since J-Day. Nobody lost out here would survive long. He switched back to Mac's channel once more, on the off chance some of them got away. "Mac, Michelle: if you can hear this we're heading northwest. Meet us at the prearranged coordinates or head back to Downtown LA, to the basement where we found Connor."

Kyle put his radio back into its pouch on his vest and he and Allison got back to their feet. Kyle looked around one last time, hoping that he'd spot them in the distance. No luck: there was nothing there. He shook his head and they both took off running through the trees.

Both of them were very afraid now; afraid for Mac, Michelle and the others, and afraid that they wouldn't make it back to the RV point and Connor and his little gang would leave them behind. Allison wouldn't put it past the lot of them to take off and abandon them. The black guy, Ellison, seemed okay, but machine was what it was: a schedule was a schedule and it would insist they left the moment its internal clock turned over six. She'd spotted how Connor stared at it, all but fawning over the thing, so he'd agree with whatever it said. And Savannah just plain didn't like her, Kyle, or any of them, so she'd probably pack up and leave even before the deadline out of sheer spite.

They ran faster through the forest, pushing themselves hard and digging deep, ignoring the biting winds and stinging rain, focused only on moving as fast as they could and getting back to the RV point before first light. Allison found herself breathing raggedly, only taking in the slightest shallow breaths, and her chest burned. The muscles in her leg even more so, aching and begging for rest as she pushed herself almost flat out, dashing round trees in her path.

Lightning crackled in the sky and she glanced again at her watch. *05:49.* "We're not gonna make it," she breathed out hoarsely, dread filling her at the thought of being left behind.

"We know where they're going," Kyle gasped out alongside her. Worst came to worst and Connor did set off without them, they'd just follow and catch up. And give them a fucking piece of their minds when they did. Still, it would be better if they did catch up before John decided to set off.

As they tore through the woods Kyle spotted a lighter area to his left; an open area. "This way," he panted to Allison as he turned towards it. When they passed a hundred yards Kyle saw what it was: the freeway. It wasn't the same spot they'd parted with Connor but it was definitely the same road. "This is it," he told Allison as he ran parallel with the tree line. "Just follow this and we'll get there." As they ran the darkness started to fade from an inky blackness into a purplish twilight, lightening into a faint bloody red mixed with grey as the sun weakly filtered through the millions of tonnes of dust and rock particles suspended in the upper atmosphere.

Allison dashed out of the trees and into the clearing, heading straight onto the tarmac road. Kyle followed after her but as soon as he was out from under even the limited cover of the bare branches he felt naked, exposed. All it would take was an HK flying over or an endo lying in wait somewhere to spot them out in the open and pick them off with a plasma rifle. But it was quicker, he had to admit.

"We're out of time," Allison said as she looked at her watch and it ticked over to exactly six. *Shit,* they were going to be left behind. Even if they caught up with them it would just show what Connor and co thought of their allies.

"Just keep moving," Kyle pushed himself even harder and lengthened his stride. After what felt like an eternity of running the signpost finally came into sight.

"Our packs are in the tree line," Allison reminded him. They'd have to waste even more time fetching them. And they had no idea where Derek and the others were. They ran back into the tree line and slowed down to a quick march, panting breathlessly from several miles of fast running without a break. They weren't used to pushing themselves that hard; when they got by eating as little as they did unnecessarily wasting energy was never a good idea.

"What took you so long?" Derek waved them over as he slung his pack on.

"How'd you get here so fast?" Kyle asked him as he saw Cooper, Myers and Torrance all stood around, pulling on their rucksacks and readying themselves.

"I'm fitter than you," Derek shrugged.

"Nobody else find any leads?" Allison asked. Everyone sullenly shook their heads and mumbled in dismay.

"We should have gone for Mexico," Cooper sighed.

"We *left them,"* Allison said woefully, agreeing with him. Mac, Michelle, Rogers and Everson: all gone; somewhere in this godforsaken forest. Alive or dead: who knew? And they were leaving them; it wasn't right at all.

"We've got no choice," Derek mirrored her earlier words. "We could search forever in this, and with this weather we won't last long if we try." He hated himself too for leaving them, but after Kyle and Allison's discovery it was more than likely they were dead or captured, and couldn't do anything for them.

Allison and Kyle pulled on their packs, even heavier now they'd soaked up plenty of rainwater, and as one the group of six quick marched towards the clearing, down the mud embankment at the end of the tree line, and across the freeway. They passed the road

sign on the far side and marched into the tree line, all of them glad to be again under even limited cover.

Derek was sure, just like Kyle and Allison, that Connor would have set off as soon as it turned six, but he figured it was worth a try. He led the group forwards and kept his eyes peeled for any signs of a camp; any signs of green canvas sheets or anything that stuck out. He saw nothing. *They'd left them.* He supposed he shouldn't be surprised; John had told him they wouldn't wait. The bastard.

"Now what?" Torrance kicked a broken branch on the ground in frustration.

"We carry on to Serrano," Derek said. "And just hope we catch them up." It was a hell of a tall order; the weather was still abysmal and showed no sign of letting up anytime soon, and they'd already lost four of their friends. Would they even be able to catch up with Connor and the rest?"

"We never should have trusted them," Allison groaned.

Something rustled above them and Allison looked up. Cameron plummeted down to the ground and landed straight in front of Allison and Kyle, bending her knees to take the impact and crouching down as she hit the ground. "Shit!" She and Kyle both rushed back in shock and fell onto their asses.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Derek asked, incredulous, as Cameron straightened up and stood upright.

"Up there," Cameron pointed upwards as three nylon ropes fell down from above and John, Ellison and Savannah fast-roped down three tree trunks. Within seconds they were on the ground and collecting their ropes, coiling them up and stuffing them into their packs.

"I thought you'd gone," Derek stared at John, surprised as hell that he'd actually stayed. "What happened to leaving us behind if we weren't back by six?"

"We decided to wait," Cameron told him. She looked at the group and saw there were still only six. "You didn't find your friends."

Kyle shook his head in dismay. "They got caught in a firefight but there's no sign of them."

"We can't wait any longer," John said. "I'm sorry, but we've gotta get going."

"We know," Derek sighed, still reluctant to leave Mac and the others behind but knowing there was no choice. He pointed up to the trees towering above them. "What were you doing up there, anyway?"

"Another convoy rolled past at five-thirty and stopped just out there," Ellison said. "It was Cameron's idea to climb up the trees; stay quiet and keep out of sight. Endos came into the tree line, as if they were looking for something. They didn't stay long; left about twenty minutes before you got here."

"If you'd been on time you would have been caught," Cameron added.

Derek had never felt so glad to have been late before, but then another thought crossed his mind. "You said they were looking for something; do you think they might have found the others?"

"It's possible," Cameron replied. "Their search pattern appeared random. We shouldn't stay here any longer." She'd been conflicted when six a.m. had arrived: her main priority was to protect John and keep him safe but he'd wanted to wait, unwilling to abandon Derek and the others. John had suggested he, Savannah and Ellison leave and Cameron remain behind for Derek, since she could easily track them and catch up without a problem. But she wasn't willing to leave his side. She wouldn't leave him again.

"We're moving," John said simply. "We've got a lot of ground to cover." He turned from the others and started walking away. Cameron immediately followed suit and fell in beside him.

"We're not taking the rear this time," Derek said to John. He started walking too and Kyle, Allison, and the others did the same, pushing ahead of Ellison and Savannah. "If we get split up again I don't want to be left behind.

John turned round to face Derek as he walked backwards for a moment. "Keep up then," he replied. It wasn't his fault Derek's friends had gotten lost in the storm. He sympathised with them, he felt guilty that they were on the move again and leaving them behind, but there was nothing they could do. They had to push on or none of them would make it.

"We'll keep them behind us," Derek gestured to Savannah and Ellison. If they did get split up again he reckoned Connor wouldn't hesitate to drop everything and go look for *his* friends. Fair enough, he thought; he'd prioritise his own friends over John's too – especially with that metal with them. But until they were through the TDE and back into the past he'd trust Connor as far as he could throw his pet metal.

Cameron led the march through the harsh, rocky terrain of Los Padres Forest – a sparse, unforgiving landscape of uncountable hills rising and falling as far as the eye could see. There were no trees where they were; the vegetation had consisted of largely shrub land before the nuclear detonations, most of which had long since died and decayed to nothing. A few isolated patches still grew a sickly yellowish brown but were sparse. Cameron counted only nineteen small areas of shrub land in her vision, which covered many square miles. They'd marched up and down hundreds of hills, down through valleys, and the journey had been difficult for some of them.

James Ellison had had to stop several times more than the rest of them, slowing their progress further. He was old but Cameron didn't begrudge him; he and Savannah had protected John, helped him to find her body and was largely responsible for her and John being

reunited: he had taught the values John Henry followed; if not for him then the other AI would have likely overwritten her instead of merging. She would have allowed him, if he'd protected John in her place, but she found herself glad she was still alive. She'd prefer not to die.

She was surprised at that; she'd never cared about her own existence before other than to keep John safe. But she considered it more and decided that being alive was better than not. *Functioning is better than not functioning,* she corrected her erratic thought patterns. She wasn't alive in a biological sense: she functioned. Strangely she didn't think that made sense either. She had sensation, she could feel, she thought. She was sentient, sapient; was that not alive? She didn't know; she resolved to find out.

She led the way up to the crest of a particularly large, steep hill and before she reached the top she dropped to her knees and crawled up the last few feet to the top.

John, just behind her, copied her motion and fell to all fours, and motioned behind him for everyone else to stay put. Allison, in third position, nodded back at him and remained still while he and Cameron carried on and poked their heads over the top of the hill.

"Set up camp," John hissed at the others behind them. He sensed hurried movement behind him as they all opened up their packs and pulled out canvases, poles, bungee cords and other items, and set to work building a series of shelters.

John looked down from the hilltop and found himself looking down over a massive valley between two steep hills, at the end of which was Serrano Point and the sea. It had taken days to get there, the route made longer after they'd found out Derek's friends had been attacked by machines – he'd ordered them to take a more indirect route and approach the plant from the north rather than the south or the east, hopefully throwing off any machines. He'd been more worried that the rest of Derek's missing men had been captured rather than killed. Dead men couldn't give up their plans.

He took out a pair of binoculars and looked down on the plant and absorbed its features into his memory. The main plant itself was situated right at the land's end, almost right on the edge of a cliff and overlooking the sea. Two large white domes stuck prominently out from behind it. He guessed they were the reactors. A few hundred feet behind it was a series of large transformers that connected via cables to electricity pylons, which in turn ran to others in a long network spread out through the valley and over the hills.

Cameron scanned from left to right, searching for defensive positions in and around the plant. She pointed to spots on the crest of the hills overlooking the valley leading to the plant. "Automated weapons," she said quietly to John. They were positioned to attack anything approaching from the valley; the most obvious route attackers would take. "Centaurs patrolling the perimeter," she noted to him. She could see four of them but there would be more elsewhere. The plant would have its own garrison of endoskeletons: forty to sixty, she estimated.

"I see an airfield," John said, peering through the field glasses. Without them he'd barely be able to make out anything at all; he was slightly envious of Cameron's superior vision, among other abilities. He made out four HKs on it, sat idly on metal landing struts on the landing field that had once been the employee car park. "Thought there'd be more," he said, not at all disappointed. Four was more than enough.

"Vandenberg air base is thirty-two miles away," Cameron told him; the largest Skynet airbase in California after LAX, and one of the largest in the Western United States. Squadrons of HKs and a battalion of endoskeletons could be scrambled quickly and flown to support the plant if necessary.

"Great," John mumbled. "So if we screw this up we can expect an army of tin cans to swoop down on us?"

"You won't fail," Cameron insisted.

"How'd you know that?" John asked doubtfully.

"Because you won't."

"You believe in me that much?" John raised an eyebrow at her. Wasn't she supposed to be the logical one out of them?

"I do," Cameron stared firmly at him. Not because he was John Connor; she'd watched him since she'd been returned to his side and she'd observed changes in him. He was harder, more resolute, more sure of himself and more decisive. "You're leading two groups on a dangerous mission; they trust you to lead them. *I* trust you."

I've got a lot to live up to, John thought nervously. He looked down at the plant through the binoculars, and carefully scrutinised every inch of the plant, the perimeter, and the surrounding area, looking for the easiest way in. As he did Cameron created a number of programs she intended to use to gain access to Serrano Point's security systems, using the ones John Henry had formed as a template. She wasn't willing to risk using the exact same attack twice, knowing Skynet was adaptive and had probably devised countermeasures against them. She created a number of worm programs that should be sufficient to bypass Skynet's cyber-defences. Without an airborne ECM capability she couldn't take control of the plant like she had done with the factory, but she didn't need to in order to do what was needed.

John studied the plant and dedicated every detail to memory, even though Cameron could do with perfect recall. He needed to know exactly where to go – or not to – in case anything happened. He wanted to know exactly where he was going every step of the way so he wouldn't find himself unsure of what to do; indecision would get them all killed if things went south. He stared at the plant silently for over an hour, remaining as perfectly still as he could, careful even to keep his breathing calm and slow, and to breathe out through his nose so no puffs of steam escaped his warm mouth into the cold air.

A plan slowly started to come together as he studied the terrain surrounding the plant. A lot would have to go right for it to work, but it was their best shot.

The pair of them slipped back down the hill and saw the handiwork Derek and the others had done while he and Cameron had been observing the plant. They'd used poles and waterproof canvases to build five shelters in a circle. There'd been no trees so they'd elevated them using thin aluminium poles and rods, and dug into the ground beneath them to give more room whilst keeping them low to the ground. The spoil had been sprinkled lightly over the tops of the stretched canvases to help them blend in from above.

The others were all in their shelters, laid out under the canvases and waiting for John to come back. When Ellison saw John coming back down from the hilltop he rolled out and crouched down on his knees, as did Savannah a moment later. Derek followed their example and one by one all the fighters filtered out of their shelters and into the area in the middle of the camp. "What did you find?" Ellison asked, spotting the look on John's face. John had something and Ellison knew it.

"It's down there," John answered. "And it's heavily defended: forty or fifty endos, a flight of HKs, Centaurs, and sentry guns dotted all around."

"How the hell are we gonna get in?" Cooper asked.

"I can access the plant and hack into their security mainframe," Cameron answered.

"In English?" Marlin stared at her.

"I can turn off their security systems and open the back door," Cameron explained.

"Then do it," Kyle said enthusiastically. He found it odd that another machine was their ace in the hole. This had definitely been the

weirdest few days of his life.

"Not yet," John said. "We go in an hour after last light," he told them. He turned and pointed to a steep ridge that ran towards the plant and then tapered down towards the ground. "Along that ridge; it runs towards the transformers at the back of the plant. Cameron will hack into the plant and shut off their sensors and automated defences, and we sneak in."

"The AIUs are on their way," Cameron added. "Half will attack the plant from the north as a distraction; the rest will cover our exit."

"What the heck's an AIU?" Dyer asked.

"Autonomous Infantry Units," Cameron said.

"Endos," Savannah translated into lay men's terms.

John nodded at Cameron and gave a small smile. He was supposed to be this great military leader, apparently, but she had as many ideas as him. "Once we're through the fence Cameron will take the lead and guide us into the plant itself," he said.

"Why the metal?" Derek asked dubiously. Another woolly part of the plan now; he didn't want to trust the success of the mission, not to mention their lives, to this tin can, regardless of how much Connor might trust it. *He* didn't.

"I've been here before," Cameron answered, anticipating John's line of thought. "John's command HQ was in Serrano Point."

"In this other timeline, right?" Kyle asked.

Cameron nodded once. "I know the layout and where the power distribution computers are located."

"If you say so," Allison eyed her suspiciously.

John snapped his attention to Allison and stared at her, his face stony and almost red with anger. "Is there a problem?" he snapped at her. He'd had enough: he could understand Allison's distaste but it was no excuse: Cameron had proven herself to him time and again now. He trusted her implicitly.

"No problem," Allison held his glare for a second before she turned away.

"Good." They were all in this together; their only chance was if they all pulled their weight and stayed united. It had been enough to keep Savannah from trying to kill Weaver, and he'd thanked his lucky stars that she'd chosen to remain behind and work on the TDE. He wondered if he'd done the right thing by keeping his distance from Derek and the others when they'd thrown the party; maybe he should have joined in like Savannah; though from what he'd heard she hadn't actually done much talking. Kyle had told him on the trip up through the sewers that between the occasional arm wrestle and titbits of brief chatter as she'd filled her mug, she'd spent most of the night drinking alone, away from the main group. That didn't surprise John at all. He looked towards Savannah and realised they were both loners; he had Cameron now and she had Ellison, but neither of them would ever fit in with a crowd. They were outcasts, and for the first time in a while he wondered what any of them would really do with themselves once they got back and managed to stop Skynet.

"What time is it?" he asked Cameron.

"Eleven-fifteen a.m.," she answered. "Sunset's at eight-fifty-three p.m."

"Say last light at nine-thirty," Ellison said helpfully.

"We move out at ten-thirty, then," John replied. He looked to Ellison and Savannah. "You guys take first watch; Kyle and Marlin will take over in two hours." He handed Ellison the binoculars he'd just been using and the pair of them Savannah took their weapons and vests from their shelter, along with a sheet of canvas and some pegs, and

moved up to the crest of the hill where he and Cameron had just come down from, leaving the rest of them in the camp. "Everyone else get some sleep."

"Hard routine," Derek followed up with an order of his own. "No fires and no cooking." They couldn't afford for machines to spot any smoke; they were far enough from the plant – maybe two miles – to be safe from patrols and automated sentries, but security cameras and sensors – not to mention the endos' eyes – would pick up a camp fire in no time at all. They'd made it this far: they couldn't afford any fuckups now.

Ellison peered through the binoculars and stared down at the plant down at the end of the valley. He turned his attention to the left of the plant and could just about see the ocean; waves crashed against the beach again and again, slowly, minutely eating away at the shore. All they had to do was wait a thousand years or so and nature would take care of the power plant for them.

He shivered slightly from the cold air, the canvas sheet draped over himself and Savannah did little to shelter them from the cold air or the sea breeze that blew over them. The strangest thing he found, being this close to the coast, was the distinct lack of seagulls; back in the day, before the war, there'd have been hundreds of the things flying all around, scavenging and cawing annoyingly at all hours of the day and night. Now their absence was noticeable.

He looked to Savannah at his right as she stared intently down at the power plant and made her own assessment of the defences. "Infrared and motion sensors, automated plasma cannons, Centaurs, looks like fifty-plus endos positioned in and around the place: they've got a goddamn army."

An HK flew out in the distance and headed east, inland. Ellison wondered if it would find Cameron's endo platoon. He hoped not;

those things might just be what they'd need to get out alive later on. He'd take any help they could get.

He watched Savannah as she observed the power plant and he couldn't help but feel bad for her. He didn't want this life for her, but at the same time she didn't know anything else. She'd grown up fighting the machines; she'd had her childhood robbed from her, her parents not only taken but erased, made into nothing more than foul memories by Weaver, and most of her life had been pain and sadness, pushed down and forcing her to become hard. He worried about what her life in the past would be like; how would she cope? Her formal education had stopped at age seven when they'd gone into hiding, so college would be out of the question. He worried that despite what she'd said earlier, she'd end up as a gun for hire out in Iraq or Afghanistan or some other war torn part of the world, unable to fit in doing anything else.

"When we get back I'm gonna get a job, put you through school," he said to her. He wanted her to have a future.

"You don't have to do that for me," Savannah replied. "I don't want to be a burden."

"You're not. I just want to do right by you. I can't see you flipping burgers for the rest of your life." It saddened him to think that in the past, with her education and her history, either that or mercenary work was about all she could look forward to. He'd kept her reading when they'd gone into hiding before the bombs fell; bought her a new book every week and she'd absorb each one like a sponge. Their hideout after J-Day had been filled with all her favourite ones, and she'd loved to read by candlelight at night, before the machines had started to roll out in force. She was bright as a button, but without any high school or college diplomas it'd be hard for her.

Savannah put down her weapon and turned towards him. She smiled at him gratefully and shifted slightly closer to him. She couldn't help but grin at his concern for her. She was thankful he

cared so much about her, but she found it a little ironic. "Funny, I'd been planning to take care of you, old man."

"Oh?" he looked at her with widened eyes, his curiosity piqued now. "You had a plan?"

"Yeah," she nodded. He was right; she wasn't going to flip burgers or work in a supermarket or a factory when she got back. She wanted to live her life. She didn't want to have to fight once they got back – the whole reason they were going back was to avoid it – but at the same time she had to admit they'd never had a dull day. She'd been thinking about it since before she'd got really trashed, and she'd spent a lot of time deep in inebriated thought that night. She'd wanted to think of what she'd do with her life. "I don't want to fight, but I want something exciting, get the adrenaline going once in a while."

"And..." Ellison asked.

"Maybe become a cop," Savannah said. Ellison couldn't keep his face straight nor could he stop himself letting out a small snort of laughter. "What?" Savannah stared at him.

"Nothing, nothing," he shook his head. "Just don't tell Sarah when we get back; she liked you before, she might not after that."

"Like I'd arrest her," she rolled her eyes. "Not like a city cop, anyway. Maybe in a small town somewhere."

"Sheriff Weaver: it's got a ring to it," Ellison nodded. Now he thought about it he could all too easily see her doing it. Woe betide the poor soul she caught speeding or shoplifting; out of good cop and bad cop he knew exactly which one Savannah would be.

"Not Weaver," Savannah shook her head. She refused to share the same name as the thing that probably killed her real parents and pretended to be her mom, especially as everyone else seemed to call it Weaver. "How about 'Ellison?'" she suggested. He'd been like

a father to her for the past eighteen years. "You pretty much adopted me anyway."

Ellison smiled back at her. He'd always wanted to have kids, and she was right; she was basically the daughter he'd never had. "Sounds good to me," he said.

John opened his eyes and instantly snapped awake, sensing movement nearby. He saw Kyle and Allison with their rifles, moving across the camp and up the hill to take watch. He poked his head out from under the canvas and looked at the rest of the shelters. He couldn't see any movement under them; either they were asleep or keeping as still as humanly possible.

He watched as Ellison and Savannah walked down towards their shelter, noticing the subtle smile on the latter's face and wondering what had happened whilst they were on watch. It wasn't her smile but her eyes that were the biggest difference; she looked happy – something he hadn't seen in her since, well, *ever.*

"They have a lot to look forward to," Cameron said to John, anticipating what he was thinking. She'd eavesdropped on their conversation out of curiosity and had heard every word.

"Yeah," John agreed. The mission was as much for them as for anything else; to give them a second chance at life. He looked back to Kyle and Allison up on the hill, watching over the power plant. "Is it a good idea for them to be up there together alone?" John asked her. "After what happened the other night?"

"You mean they had sex."

"Real subtle, Cameron."

"Subtlety's not part of my programming," she replied. She didn't understand the need for subtlety and hints; direct communication was more efficient and from all social interactions she'd observed she judged things would be simpler if people were straightforward.

"Fair enough," John shrugged. "But yeah, that." He was still curious about Kyle and Allison. More about Kyle, if he was honest; he didn't really care much for Allison and knew she didn't think much of him, either. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty," Cameron told him. "Two hours until last light."

"I'm gonna take watch with Kyle," he said as he reached for his rifle and started to edge out from under the canvas. Cameron shot out her hand and grabbed John by the wrist, stopping him.

"You need to sleep," she told him. Since they'd been under the canvas they'd been in close physical contact and she'd monitored his vital signs throughout. He'd only slept for four hours out of the last forty; pushing himself hard and leading with her from the front.

"I need to take another look at the plant," John said. "In case I missed anything. I'll send Allison down."

He slipped out of his sleeping bag, rolled it up and stuffed it into his rucksack, checked all his gear was packed away and grabbed his weapon and vest, and crawled out from under the canvas. He made his way up the hill and saw two lumps in the shelter Savannah and Ellison had set up as an observation post, and noticed the two pairs of worn brown boots just slightly poking out of the back. He prodded the smaller pair with the side of his feet and saw rustling as Allison crawled backwards out of the OP.

"What is it?" she asked, looking up at John.

"I'll take this watch," John said quietly to her. "Go get some sleep."

"Why? You've done your shift."

"Because I said so," John replied gruffly. "Go eat something and get your head down. We've got three hours."

Allison disappeared back into the OP and John heard a brief kiss between them before she emerged again with her weapon and webbing. "All yours," she said as she passed by and made her way down to the camp. John got onto all fours and crawled underneath, taking Allison's place. The ground was still warm from where she'd been laying – a good thing, John supposed; it wasn't raining anymore and the winds were gone but the air was still very cold. He reckoned if he'd asked Cameron she'd have told him it was a degree or two below freezing. He picked up the binoculars left on the ground and started to look over the plant, soaking up everything he saw like a sponge.

"What're you doing here?" Kyle asked him, keeping his head straight forward and not once taking his eyes off the plant ahead of them.

"Taking watch," John replied.

"Keeping an eye on us, you mean?" Kyle said. "You still don't trust us?"

"You guys haven't really given me much reason to. But that's not it."

Kyle stared forward through the scope on his plasma rifle – a Schmidt and Bender hunting scope he'd jury-rigged to the top of the weapon years ago – and kept his eyes on a Centaur patrolling along one of the valleys to the northeast of the plant.

He turned to face John, taking his attention from the patrol as it disappeared down into the valley. "So what is it?"

"Let's just say I was worried you and Allison would be paying attention to something other than the plant," John said, a slight smirk on his face.

"Oh," Kyle caught on and grinned sheepishly, feeling himself turn red with embarrassment. "You all heard it, then?"

"Cameron did," John said. He decided not to mention that he'd almost accidentally walked in on them. "I wouldn't have thought though... you and Allison. How did you guys even meet?"

"Long time ago," Kyle said, "back when there actually was a resistance against the tin cans. I was fifteen at the time. Derek and I were in a squad patrolling around Palmdale, planting IEDs along Skynet supply and patrol routes. HK buzzed overhead and we scattered for cover. I ended up diving into an overturned dumpster and ended up face to face with this little girl, maybe nine or ten; filthy, half-starved and scared to death. She backed into the corner and stared at me, terrified; too afraid to even move."

"She told me about her family," John said. "Guess she saw you with a gun and thought you were after her."

Kyle nodded at John. He was spot on. "The HK passed over without seeing us and Derek called us all out. I couldn't leave this little girl all alone so I tried to pull her out with me."

"Bet that didn't go down well."

Kyle raised his right hand and showed John the skin on the back of it. A series of short pink scars ran together on the back of his hand in a semicircle running from the knuckle of his forefinger to the base of his thumb. To John they looked a lot like teeth marks.

"Could say that," Kyle absently ran his fingers over the scars. "She bit me, hard. Almost down to the bone: good survival instinct. Anyway; I managed to drag her out of the dumpster and we brought her back with us. She didn't say anything for three days, just sat in the corner and watched us. She told me later she was afraid we'd kill her."

"What did you do?" John asked.

"We'd kept dogs with us for a while; they could sniff out metal before we even saw it coming and they were pretty handy hunting for food. A few days after we found Allison one of our bitches gave birth to a litter of puppies; I gave one of them to her to cheer her up, taught her how to look after it, and gave it a name."

"Cassie," John realised.

"We started to bond," Kyle said. "We got close, like brother and sister almost, even when she started growing up. But it wasn't until our last night in the subway that anything really happened between us. What about you and Cameron?" Kyle asked.

That took John completely off guard; both the question itself and the fact Kyle hadn't said 'Cameron' rather than 'metal bitch' or anything similar. "How'd you mean?" he asked.

"There's something going on there," Kyle said. "I'm not blind, Connor."

"John."

"Okay, John. But what's the deal with you two?"

"Long story."

Kyle pointed up to the sky; it was still a dull grey and the sun hadn't begun to set yet. "Not like we're going anywhere," he prompted.

"My future self sent her to protect me when I was fifteen. She kept me safe, protected me from this other machine sent back to kill me. Things got complicated."

"I'll say," Kyle replied. He picked up his rifle once again and peered through it. He looked onto the airfield and saw it now held six HKs, not four like they'd previously thought. Plus however many were in the air on patrol. He really didn't like how there could be a whole legion of tin cans in there without them knowing about it. "You two

are pretty close, then?" he asked. "You came forward nearly twenty years; you must care a lot about her."

John noticed there was no revulsion in Kyle's voice, no recoiling in horror or snide tone to his remark. "You don't find it weird?"

"Yeah, but whatever," Kyle shrugged. "I'd keep her away from Allison once we're back: things could get ugly between them."

"Can't argue with that," John agreed. He looked through the binoculars and made another sweep of the plant. Cameron had told him they wanted to enter the largest building, in front of the reactors. Inside there was the power distribution systems they'd need to sabotage to ensure Skynet couldn't reroute the power away from Zeiracorp once they were done.

"I'm sorry about your friends," John said, meaning all of them; the ones who'd been killed by the T-888 as well as Mac and the others. They'd agreed to help him on this operation and now they were gone.

"Once we go back we stop Skynet, right?" Kyle asked. "You know how?"

"That's the plan," John nodded.

"I guess if we manage it, at least they won't have died for nothing," he said, understandably.

"We can give them a chance in my time," John said, starting to see a little of Weaver's thinking. "It's not the same but it's something." They could go back and give everyone a second chance; that's what this mission was all about, he realised. It wasn't just about going home now he'd found Cameron: he now had the fate of the world resting on his shoulders once again. He hoped this time it would be the last.

John stood in front of the group as they hurried to disassemble their camp and stow it all away into their packs. Cameron had already packed their own shelter away into her rucksack and placed it on the ground underneath a single large sheet they'd laid out to cover the packs from view. The sun had set and it was now fully dark, so their features were hard to make out in the darkness.

"Its ten-thirty," Cameron told John, stood beside him with her plasma rifle shouldered and ready.

"It's time," John said to the others. "Savannah, Ellison, Derek and Kyle; you're with us. Everyone else stays here."

"No way," Allison shook her head. "We're not staying behind." She didn't want to leave Kyle and Derek alone with John; not with their track record of losing friends every time they dealt with him.

"We can't all go," John said to her. "We need people to cover our exit and keep eyes on the plant, tell us if anything changes."

"Wait a minute," Marlin started. He pointed his finger at Cameron. "You said before it took months of wearing the place down before you could take it in the other timeline; so why are you now saying we do it with half a dozen men?"

"Stealth," Cameron replied. "Less people means less chance of being caught."

"I want to go with you," Allison argued, her tone resolute.

"We're not arguing about this," John snapped. "We're going. Now."

Kyle strode forward but Allison grabbed his hand and spun him around to face her. She pulled his face down towards hers and pressed her lips to his as she wrapped her arms around him and felt him do the same. "Cover our asses," he smiled at her.

She kissed him once more and reluctantly let him go. She wanted so badly to join them, more than anything, but she could see from John's face that wouldn't happen. She'd do everything she could to make sure Kyle and Derek got back okay.

John stopped them just behind the top of the hill and turned to Cameron. "Ready?" he asked her.

"Yes," Cameron replied. She opened up her wireless communications array and probed the plant's defences. She was immediately met by numerous firewalls and defensive applications that interrogated her for identification. Cameron activated her own adapted version of the Brute Force program John Henry had developed and attacked the firewalls. Skynet had adapted, she realised, and had created defences to combat her Brute Force attacks. She'd anticipated it, however; as she'd warned John Henry. She increased the attacks and simultaneously selected a virus she'd created especially from the occasion.

She wrapped it in a worm program and uploaded it, making short work of the defences as it 'burrowed' through firewalls and created hundreds of copies of itself. Cameron ceased her Brute Force attacks and allowed the worm to spread itself throughout the plant's defences, rapidly invading and overwhelming them whilst she monitored their progress. In seconds she had a backdoor into of all the plant's operations. But Skynet was adaptive and she knew it wouldn't last.

Cameron accessed the backdoor and took control of the plant's security systems. The images captured by scores of security cameras, infrared and motion sensors washed over Cameron as she saw everything Serrano Point could see. The sheer amount of sensory input flooding her CPU was a strange sensation. She'd experienced it before when John had inserted her into the ARTIE system, and she'd seen through the sensors and cameras of John Henry's UCAVs, but it was still intriguing. She liked it.

She disabled all of the sensors and cameras, rendering the power plant's security systems completely blind. Then she began her second stage: she opened up a wireless connection to the twelve AIUs positioned north of the plant and commanded them to start their attack.

"It's done," Cameron told John.

He nodded solemnly to her and took a deep, nervous breath as he stepped out over the crest of the hill and started down the other side. "Let's go."

Chapter 19

The twelve endoskeleton AIUs stood perfectly still atop a low hill to the north of the plant, only a hundred yards from cliffs overlooking the turbulent sea. They'd marched to the north and stood sentinel in position overlooking Serrano Point. They were machines, metal soldiers with computer brains, without any emotion whatsoever: they'd wait in position forever if it was required.

ATTENTION ALL AIU'S: INCOMING MESSAGE. STAND BY...

AIU units 1-12 commence attack on Serrano Point's north perimeter. Target HK airfield and engage enemy AIUs. All units prohibited from attacking power plant structures.

The machines instantly stepped forward as one, raised their plasma rifles and marched down the hill towards the plant. AIU01 at the head of the twelve-strong spread out formation identified seven automated plasma cannons in their vicinity, positioned along the hilltops to the north of the plant. An HK flew up in the air at 3000 feet and curved round towards them.

AIU01 transmitted targeting data to the other units and as one they all pointed their plasma rifles at a number of targets and opened fire. AIUs 01, 02 and 03 aimed upwards and fired multiple plasma blasts into the sky, sending burning plasma gas up into the air, glowing incandescently like tracer fire. Several shots struck the HK and its right engine blew apart; the still functional left jet flipped the hunter-killer onto its back and it plummeted, smashing down onto the ground with an almighty eruption of flame as its hydrogen fuel ignited and blasted the machine apart. The fireball rose up rapidly and turned bluish purple as the plasma stores on board ignited and added to the conflagration.

More shots whipped across the air almost silently from the rifles and struck all seven inactive sentry guns, causing even more explosions to flare in the night sky.

AIU01 to AIUs 02-12: initial targets eliminated. Advance towards factory and engage defences.

It didn't take long for Skynet to react. It was almost completely blind – all Serrano Point's sensors had been disabled but it could still see what was happening via the HKs' sensors and was still in command of its machines based at the plant. It launched two more HKs from the airfield and mobilised twenty AIUs to target whatever threat was approaching from the north, having lost contact with the automated weapons in that sector.

The Skynet endos marched out of the plant, brandishing their own weapons identical to Cameron's AIUs. The reprogrammed machines were still at an elevated position halfway up the hill they'd started from and fired down on their opponents; height provided them the advantage as their shots rained down from above onto the Skynet endos, smashing into their armoured chassis' and melting hyperalloy armour. Three Skynet machines were felled in the first two seconds of the attack.

The defending units fired back and brilliant flashes of blue-white plasma crisscrossed the air as both sides unleashed a torrent of ammunition at each other. Three endos targeted AIU06 and fired rapid single shots. White hot superheated plasma smashed into its upper torso and sent molten pieces of its armour flying, but its chassis withstood the first few shots before the fire from three weapons boiled through its tough body and shattered the fuel cell recessed in the centre of its chest. AIU06 fell to the ground, inactive.

The remaining machines attempted to pick up the slack and increased their rate of fire; concentrating their shots on a small number of enemy machines to disable or destroy them quickly and then target another. Two Skynet machines went down, then three. A fourth was decapitated by shots from 04 before a flurry of shots

smashed into 08 and 09. 10, 11, and 12 concentrated their fire on a single endo and fried it with two dozen shots between them before they targeted another machine. The reprogrammed AIUs were outnumbered but they compensated with the advantage of their height up on the hill and the sheer ferocity of their attacks.

All AIUs: advance into Serrano Point perimeter immediately. Neutralise all hostile forces and internal defences.

Cameron received reports from the AIUs attacking the plant and saw two HKs take off from the landing field into the air, and turn north. She still had access to the security systems and eavesdropped on Skynet issuing orders to mobilise a further ten AIUs to proceed north and engage the unknown attackers. She knew with reinforcements her reprogrammed units wouldn't last long. They had to move quickly.

"We're ready," Cameron said to John.

Without another word John took point position and quickly marched forwards. Cameron took up stride next to him, followed by Savannah, Ellison, Derek and Kyle. They moved in silence and John broke into a run, wanting to get there as quickly as possible and knowing that Cameron would be aware of any threat to them even whilst moving quickly.

They ran over the uneven, muddy terrain into the valley, and John spotted the large sentry guns positioned over them, facing down from the hills into the narrow passage and looming menacingly over them. Between those and the HKs and endos, John reckoned Skynet could easily repel a whole army advancing from the land. He hadn't asked Cameron but he imagined that the seaborne commando assault his future self had thought up had been a pretty bloody battle.

"I hope those things don't come back online," Derek muttered nervously to Kyle. What made him even more worried was, from what John had told them, all that kept the plasma cannons from blowing them away was Cameron. What if the cyborg had a glitch? He thought grimly. A few shots from the monstrous weapons would wipe them all out.

"They won't," John said quietly.

"Where're all the endos?" Ellison asked. He looked all around and expected to see at least *some* defences. Seeing their path unopposed just seemed wrong, like they were walking into a trap.

"Skynet sent them north to engage the AIUs attacking," Cameron replied. She received another casualty report from her forces; another unit had been lost and there were only seven remaining. *Stay prone to the ground. Operate in pairs and fire and manouevre,* she ordered them. The one disadvantage the machines had in combat was they had no sense of self preservation and simply stood whilst firing. Ordering them to adopt human tactics would preserve her machines long enough for her, John and the others to complete the operation.

"Stop!" Cameron raised her hand to signal the others and gestured for them to crouch. "Machine," she pointed to a low hilltop just before the plant itself, a mile from their current position, where a single endo stood and faced to the east. It hadn't seen them yet but if it turned its head just slightly she estimated it would see them. She took aim with her plasma rifle, targeted the endo's skull, and fired three rapid shots.

Blue-white plasma tore through the air in a fraction of a second towards the machine. The first shot smashed into the side of its skull, just below the chip port, and burned into the hyperalloy as the force of the shot knocked it askew. The second shot struck just below the first and melted through the already weakened metal. The third bolt shattered what was left of its protective armour and boiled the CPU into soup inside the skull. The machine dropped to the ground.

"Clear," Cameron said simply as she stood up and took point.

"Not bad," Savannah smirked. "Couldn't have done it better myself."

"Thank you," Cameron smiled politely. "Stay here," she told everyone. She made her way up the hill, crouching down as she neared the top, and lay prone on the ground as she crested the very tip of it. The endo was inert, a wide open hole in its skull smoked slightly and she smelt the faint odour of burnt metal and silicone. In the distance on the far side of the plant she could hear the firefight still raging between her AIUs and the Skynet machines. A pair of HKs were in the air and exchanging fire with her endos. She knew with the aircraft engaged her reprogrammed machines wouldn't last much longer; they needed to move faster. She observed the plant and saw that inside Serrano's perimeter three more AIUs stood sentry between them and their target: one atop the white office building to the right of the main complex; one on the far left, and the third stood just in front of the plant's entrance. There were no signs of Centaurs nearby. She quickly took aim at the endo high up on the office block and fired three rapid shots, then switched target immediately the split second she saw it drop. She fired a dozen shots and all three targets were downed in a little over three seconds. She smiled at her handiwork: even for a terminator it was exceptional shooting.

She beckoned the others to follow up after her and they reached the Serrano Point's perimeter fence without any further encounters; the plant itself loomed high and cast a large shadow over them. Cameron marched up to the fence, reached up to lace her fingers into the links and tore it down with one hand, clearing their path into the plant.

"Lead the way," John said to Cameron. She knew the plant; she'd been here before. "Eyes open, mouths shut," he hissed to everyone else. They'd been lucky so far that Skynet had sent the bulk of its forces to the north, but they had no idea how many endos were inside the plant itself.

Cameron led them through the open space of the car park, which was now the HK airfield. Savannah stared nervously at the three remaining aircraft stood idle on the tarmac, afraid the HKs could see them and would activate any moment now. An idea came to mind and she broke off from the rest of the group towards the passive HKs, taking care to tread as quietly as she could as she stalked over to them.

She'd never been this close to one before and as she approached she swallowed nervously at the sheer size of the thing. Stood idle, with its landing gear holding it up, it was three times her height and the length of a small jet fighter. Even in the darkness she could see it well enough to make out some of its features, notably the large plasma cannon slung under its belly, almost as long as she was tall. It was pointed in her general direction and that made her even more wary; if it came online it wouldn't need to take off or even aim to blow her away. The whole thing looked sleek and sharp, and made her even more determined to do this.

She ducked underneath its fuselage and walked in a crouch underneath it towards the plasma cannon. She pulled out a block of Semtex and stuck it to the weapon, placed a detonator on it, then made her way back out from under it. If things went south she could press a button on the remote control and the thing would blow sky high; hopefully its hydrogen fuel would take out the other two aircraft nearby, too.

"Good thinking," Kyle slapped her on the back as she made her way back and joined them once again.

"I'm not just a pretty face," she smirked back.

Cameron led the group past the airfield and towards the plant proper: a large, long red building that dominated the site. Next to it was a white six storey structure that held the offices, which in Cameron's time had been used as the Resistance's barracks. Behind the red building were the two reactors, encased in massive reinforced concrete domes. She took them towards an entrance at

the front of the red building, all the time watching and listening for any trace of movement.

John pressed the com button on his radio and looked back at the rolling hills behind them. Up there Allison and the others were keeping watch over them and keeping their exit route clear. "Allison," he spoke low into the mouthpiece. "We're heading into the plant. Let us know if there's any trouble outside."

"Will do," she replied quickly.

Cameron pushed through the heavy double doors first and entered the building, stepping into the main corridor that ran the length of the structure. Above them hung a series of metal pipes that ran along the ceiling and turned off at various junctions. The lights inside were dull red emergency lighting – Skynet not seeing the necessity of wasting energy on the neon strip lights that brightly illuminated the entire plant when she and Sarah had infiltrated as temporary workers. Everything was similar to how she remembered it; with the exception of the complete stillness inside. In her future it had been a hive of activity as hundreds of resistance fighters scurried back and forth, engaged in various tasks. The plant was completely automated so there was no need for machine crews supervising the operations.

"There's a lot of cameras around here," Derek commented nervously as he marched behind John and Cameron and spotted security cameras every twenty feet or so.

"They're deactivated," Cameron told him. She understood Derek's and Kyle's doubts; to them she was nothing more than a killing machine. They didn't understand what she really was. Cameron herself still didn't fully understand anymore. She felt capable of so much more than she had before, but she wanted to find out how much so.

"Where to?" John asked her.

"Next turn on the right," Cameron answered. "Then up four storeys."

"There any elevators we can take?" Savannah asked her.

"Not without attracting attention," Cameron replied.

"We've marched nearly two-hundred miles; what's a few flights of stairs?" Ellison shrugged. He also didn't like the idea of being in an elevator controlled by a completely automated, Skynet-run facility, if the machines realised they were inside. No, the stairs were a much safer bet, he thought.

In silence they reached the staircase and ascended up four storeys as quietly as they could with their boots all stamping on the ground. To John it sounded horrifically loud and he just prayed there weren't anymore endos patrolling the inside of the place. The last thing they needed was to end up in a firefight inside a nuclear plant; that couldn't end well for anyone.

At the top of the staircase was a pair of double doors with a sign reading *restricted area: authorised personnel only,"* and a security desk to the right. Savannah picked up a clipboard off from the desk's surface and wiped the eighteen years' worth of accumulated dust from the front, revealing a list of names of personnel who'd logged in and out of the area housing the power distribution systems. Two mouldy coffee cups also stood on the desk and she pulled a photo stuck to the top of one of the inactive computer screens and dusted it down. The photo showed a middle aged man with a pot belly, moustache and close cropped hair stood smiling with a blonde woman and two teenage kids; a boy and a girl.

"It's like it's frozen in time," she commented.

"Chances are they abandoned the place the minute they heard the bombs dropped on J-Day," Derek replied to her. "Probably rushed home to see their families."

It was strange, Savannah thought. It made sense, but seeing it like this was unreal; a place under Skynet's control, right under its nose and yet seemingly untouched – at least on the inside - by the war

and the machines. It was like someone had taken a snapshot of the plant on J-Day and nothing had changed since then. Time had just stopped and everything had remained still and gathered dust.

"I'd have thought all this stuff would've been cleared," John said.

"Skynet never saw the need to remove it," Cameron told him. Unless such things hindered the plant's operations or its security Skynet wouldn't commit the resources to remove human artefacts; it wasn't necessary and was an inefficient use of machines. It was easier to leave it in place.

Cameron pushed the double doors aside and the others followed after her into the corridor beyond the security desk. Beyond the doors the passage was completely sterile; not a single speck of dust or dirt. There were no windows in this part of the plant and the only light came from the dull blood red emergency lighting.

They passed a number of rooms on either side and John warily turned to face each one, aiming his weapon as he did in case there was a machine lurking around. The place was too quiet, he thought. "I thought you said Skynet had an army here," he whispered to her. So far they'd hardly seen any machines. Some were out there fighting against Cameron's reprogrammed endos but it still seemed like what she'd said about a legion of machines being stationed here was pretty high off the mark.

"That was when you led the resistance," Ellison quietly said. "I'm guessing without you Skynet never really saw that much of a threat to the plant."

"Whatever. I'll take any luck I can get," Derek murmured. This time travel stuff was pretty weird to him still and he just couldn't reconcile Connor with some kind of strategic mastermind the metal kept going on about – different timelines or no. Whatever the reason, he was just glad there wasn't an army of machines here: "makes our job a little easier."

Finally Cameron turned right into a large room at the end of the corridor. The walls were covered in complex monitoring and measuring instruments; a combination of older style gauges and digital displays. Dominating the centre of the room was a large island table with dozens of workstations, computer terminals, and instrument panels lined with controls, switches and knobs that none of the humans had even the remotest clue as to what they did. Chairs had been pushed back away from the workstations. The screens were all black and switched off. A number of flat screen monitors hung from the wall but they remained powered down; a waste of electricity otherwise, with no humans to benefit from interpreting the readings when Skynet was capable of doing so itself, hundreds of times faster, much more efficiently and without making mistakes.

Kyle stepped towards the screens and reached out to try and switch one on. Cameron shot out a hand and grabbed him by the back of his vest, roughly yanking him backwards. "Don't," she told him as he stared at her in confusion. "Skynet doesn't know we're here. We should keep it that way." If they turned on devices then Skynet would be able to tell very quickly that the power consumption had increased and what it was caused by, and quickly deduce that intruders had made it inside Serrano Point. It was the same reason she hadn't taken them up the stairs via the elevators.

"Don't touch anything," John reinforced her.

"This is where we reroute the power?" Kyle asked.

"This is where *I* reroute the power," Cameron replied.

"So what do you need *us* for?" Derek asked. As far as he could tell they'd all been passengers on this ride; they were surplus to requirement: the machine could have just hiked up from LA to Serrano Point in half the time they had and left them all safely at the TDE. They wouldn't have had to lose four of their friends on the way.

"We were expecting more defences than this," Cameron replied simply. As she spoke the bulk of her attention was working on the plant's systems. The worm she'd created had provided her unlimited access to all the plant's operating systems until Skynet had retaken control. She'd designed her worm programs to also spread a virus and corrupt as many systems as possible to be particularly troublesome and slow the AI's attempts to eradicate all her malware.

She accessed the plant's power distribution systems and instantly saw where every last watt of energy was being directed to; evenly throughout all the factories, repair facilities, airfields, communication hubs, work camps, and research laboratories. She immediately cut off power to one-hundred-and-six Skynet facilities in California, rendering the AI temporarily blind and incommunicado throughout the region. She then reconfigured the power distribution and reconnected the lines that ran under Downtown and through to Zieracorp. In a matter of seconds Weaver and the TDE were able to receive power again, and she redirected the flow of electricity straight to Zieracorp.

Cameron then created her own defensive firewalls and activated them, further blocking Skynet from regaining control of the plant. She knew they wouldn't keep it out forever but it gave them time. Once Skynet was through the firewalls it would have to eradicate her viruses, constantly self replicating worm programs, and correct the myriad systems she'd corrupted. Cameron then went a step further: she disabled all emergency shutdown protocols so Skynet would be unable to shut the reactor down, preventing it from ceasing energy production and rebooting all systems. She wrote a program that would overload the reactors and cause catastrophic meltdown should Skynet attempt to shut them down: the AI was calculating, exact, and wouldn't risk losing its main supply of power in California, and would be forced to contend with the malware she'd left behind.

"I'm done," she told them.

John pulled out his radio and switched it to Weaver's channel. "Weaver, how's the TDE going?"

"It's ready. You're late; I've been waiting for you to contact me," Weaver replied. John thought he could detect a hint of impatience in her voice. Was that even possible? He'd always assumed terminators, due to their design, would have practically unlimited patience.

"Cameron's redirected power to you," he said back. "Light it up, we'll try and get back in two days if we can. Out."

He switched the radio back to the original setting so he could contact Allison and the others if need be, put it away and turned to Cameron. "Is that it?" he asked her. "Are we ready to leave?"

"Not yet," Cameron said. She curled her hand into a fist and punched a computer console as hard as she could, shattering the plastic casing and tearing through the wires inside. "We need to make sure Skynet can't reroute power back from Zeiracorp." Even with all her malware in place she wasn't satisfied it was enough.

Savannah pulled out the last block of Semtex from her webbing pouch and placed it onto the central island in the room. She inserted a detonator into it and pulled out the remote control from her pocket. When she pressed the button it would now take out the power distribution centre as well as the HKs on the airfield.

"Good thinking," Kyle said to her. He took out a hand grenade, pulled the pin but held the handle fast in his hand. He jammed the grenade in place behind a computer screen behind the wall; when the Semtex blew the concussion would knock the screen away and the grenade would detonate.

"Set explosives in the other rooms," John told them all. Derek, Kyle, and Ellison exited and went off in search of other places to plant explosives as a distraction. Savannah stayed behind with John and Cameron and they left the room, entering the corridor.

"I want to get back to LA in forty-eight hours," John told them both.

"That's a hell of a trip," Savannah said. "Took us nearly five days to get up here."

John turned to Cameron. "How long do you think it'll take for Skynet to get Serrano Point back under control?"

"I don't know," she replied honestly.

"How long would it take you if you were in Skynet's place?" he asked.

"At least forty-eight hours." Cameron had created so many problems with the plant now that even Skynet would take time to regain control of the plant and its distribution systems. "Longer once the explosives detonate," she added. "The machines would have to physically reroute the power lines without the control systems in place.

"We'll say two days then," John reiterated, erring on the side of caution. He didn't fancy the prospect of it much himself; he'd hardly eaten, barely slept, and now he was the one saying they had to push on even harder and faster. They wouldn't be able to stop for anything. He didn't know how he'd cope, but he knew he'd have to somehow; it was the only way.

Allison laid flat out on her stomach and watched the power plant through the night vision goggles she'd scavenged from Savannah's pack. She'd observed John and the machine leading their covert entry into the plant and hadn't seen anything for a good half hour or more since they'd disappeared into the main complex. She was getting nervous now.

She couldn't hear anymore fighting from the other side of the plant and one of the two launched HKs – the other one having been shot down – hovered above the airfield and rotated its cylindrical thrust-vectored engines until they were completely vertical. Then it

extended its landing gear, lowering down a few feet under the aircraft's fuselage as the HK slowly descended down onto the tarmac. The second it was down service drones rolled forwards on fat tyres and tracks to tend to the aircraft, bringing one section of otherwise still power plant to life. The fact the HK had landed could only be a bad sign; the endos launching a diversionary attack were all gone.

"Keep your eyes peeled, Cooper," she told the blonde fighter lying prone next to her, watching the plant as well. The others were watching their rear and making sure their way out was kept clear. She handed Cooper the night vision goggles and shouldered her M4 in the prone position, preferring it to the bulky image intensifiers. She looked through the weapon's scope and, giving her a more up close view of the plant still in its ghostly green night sight image.

"See anything?" she asked him as she swept her scope along the plant, looking for any signs of activity.

"Not yet," Cooper replied.

"What're you gonna do when we get back?" she asked him.

"Eat until I puke, probably," Cooper replied. "After that I don't know. Help stop Skynet, I guess."

That was a given, Allison thought. Nobody in their right mind who'd lived through the war and got the miracle of being able to go back would ever allow it to happen again. How could anyone, knowing they'd have to live through it twice? "They said they know how to stop Skynet," she said. "You believe them?"

"Why would they lie?" Cooper asked. "They were telling the truth about the time machine, weren't they?"

Allison nodded her head absently. They'd told the truth about the time machine, and it seemed Connor had told them the truth the whole time, but she wondered how they knew this; what exactly did

they know that would allow them to prevent the whole war and the end of the world? And why hadn't he told any of them? His guys all knew but none of her group did. Not much of an alliance when one half withholds information from the others, she thought.

"Damn! I got something," Cooper growled in a low voice. "Movement."

"Where?" Allison asked. She couldn't see anything.

"Fifty feet right of the complex entrance," Cooper told her. She swept her rifle back to the entrance they'd disappeared through and moved it slowly to the right until she saw what he was talking about. She couldn't see it well through the assault rifle's sights, but she could spot something moving towards the main complex and from the size of it, it could only be an endo. It continued on in front of the main complex and turned at the entrance. Allison bit her lip with worry as it disappeared into the building. *Fuck!*

She pulled out her radio and held it by her left ear, holding the rifle with her right still. "Connor: an endo just entered the building... I think you've been made."

"Understood Allison; we're on our way out now. Thanks." John put his radio away and resisted the temptation to swear under his breath. He turned to the others stood around him and tried to look calm – though inside he was flapping big time. *How the hell does Skynet know exactly where we are?* He felt trickles of cold sweat running down his temples and the back of his neck and he didn't need Cameron to tell him his heart was pounding a mile a minute.

"We're getting out of here," John said to the others. "Everyone planted explosives okay?"

Kyle, Ellison and Derek all nodded in unison. "I planted a block near a bunch of drums that said 'flammable' on the side: should go off like the Fourth of July," Derek commented.

"We'll need the distraction," Cameron replied as she took point and quickly led them back through the corridor, out the double doors and past the security station and down the flights of stairs. Cameron didn't even bother with the steps, simply leaping down each flight and securing the next one as John led the others in a hurried run after her.

Cameron opened a set of doors at the bottom of the stairs and a plasma bolt immediately blasted the doorframe, missing her by an inch and pelting her with red hot wood and plaster fragments. Cameron dived to the side and identified the shooter as she hit the ground: an endoskeleton AIU armed with a plasma rifle. She pushed her own weapon forward and fired twice, striking it in the chest and forcing it backwards as the bolts smashed through several inches of hyperalloy.

"Cameron!" John jumped down the last half dozen steps, rolled to the side, covering Cameron with his body as he whipped the AA-12 up and let rip with a long, loud burst of automatic at the endo. The FRAG-12 explosive armour piercing rounds smashed into the machine and penetrated through the already damaged chest plates, chewing into the delicate power generation systems and the fuel cell beneath. The machine fired off another shot but the force of John's shotgun blasts knocked its aim far wide and it instead struck the wall to his left as the metal fell backwards to the ground and didn't move.

"What the hell was that about?" Derek snapped as he followed after John; it had happened so fast he'd barely had time to react. He'd been right behind Connor but all he'd seen was the kid launch himself down the stairs and blast a tin can to pieces... over *another tin can.*

John ignored Derek and leaned down, offering Cameron his hand to help her up. She didn't need it but still; it was nice to have help. "You

okay?" he asked her.

"I'm fine," she said as she took his hand and allowed him to help her up. She appreciated the gesture, unnecessary as it was. She hadn't been hit and the only damage was some partial burns from the closeness of the plasma shot and some splinters embedded in the side of her face and neck. They were superficial and would heal within hours.

"Can we go now?" Savannah asked, "before its friends show up?"

"Damn right," Kyle muttered. "Metal must have heard that; if they didn't know we were here, they do now."

They bolted through the corridor as a squad, sprinting through the complex towards the entrance they'd come in through. There was no alarm, Savannah realised. That had to be good, surely? Maybe the tin cans were so busy with Cameron's endos there weren't anymore nearby to hear John's burst of fire. She hoped so, anyway.

Finally they reached the large reinforced double doors and Cameron shoved them aside roughly, forcing them open as she entered the cold night air once more. She did a visual sweep of the area around them and saw a Centaur rolling outside the perimeter fence to the south, between them and the valley they'd come in from.

She ducked back into the building and pulled the doors ajar, leaving it fractionally open so she could watch it go by. Its massive form towered over the fences and the guns swivelled left and right, tracking for targets.

"How long until it passes by?" John asked her.

"One minute, thirteen seconds," Cameron estimated. If they moved out before that they'd be in its line of sight. Once it had turned round the corner the main complex would block them from its view.

Ellison and Kyle brought up the rear, looked backwards and then at each other nervously as a faint sound of approaching metallic footsteps echoed behind them.

"I don't think we've got that long," Ellison said warily as he shouldered his machine gun and took aim. Inside the building it was a massive, unwieldy weapon in the confines of the corridor but it felt comforting in his hands nonetheless.

The sound grew louder and became a constant clatter they all recognised as metal feet hitting the ground. A machine was coming.

Cameron remained rooted to the spot for several more seconds and watched the Centaur pass by them. Its back was now to them. They had to move. She silently slipped through the door, followed by John, and moved quietly as she could to her right, hugging the wall. Savannah and Derek followed afterwards, and then Kyle and Ellison, who didn't bother closing the door as the sound might give them away.

They crept along the side of the main complex, keeping in the shadows and treading as carefully as if they were in a minefield, keeping their eyes peeled for anything they might step on that would make noise and give them away.

The Centaur finally rolled round the corner and out of their sight. Cameron burst out from cover and sprinted with everything she had for the fence, crossing the distance faster than any athlete in history. The moment she reached the tear she'd made in the fence she hit the ground, lay prone and covered John as he dashed through the open ground towards her, somewhat slower than the superhuman pace she'd set. Savannah and Derek ran together afterwards, John's not-uncle reaching the perimeter just a little faster than his red haired counterpart.

Kyle and Ellison came next, and the former was surprised at the older man's speed and agility for his age. Fair play to him, he thought for a moment as Ellison kept pace with him. *He definitely*

eats his Wheaties. Both of them ran to the fence, breathing hard as they crossed the hundred-metre distance. Neither of them saw the endo appear in from the entrance they'd left behind. Neither of them saw it raise its weapon and take aim.

A single plasma bolt shot through the air with a high pitched whine and struck Kyle in the small of his back. He stumbled, inertia carrying him forwards several steps as he staggered and finally fell to the ground.

"Kyle!" Derek ripped off half his magazine at the endo and roared out in anger at the sight of his brother downed. Savannah and John immediately joined in the salvo and pumped their own rounds into the machine. John's AA-12 ran empty as the shells tore the tin can's shoulder apart and severed its gun arm. He instantly switched to the battle rifle and waited out. Floodlights flicked on and illuminated the air around the camp. Engines whined and whirred to life as the HKs came online and received orders to take off.

Ellison turned back without hesitation and ran to Kyle, kneeling down next to him. He rolled the younger man onto his back and looked at the exit wound in the side of his gut; big enough to fit his fist into; the shot had punched a hole clean through him. There was surprisingly little blood and he could see the wound had already cauterised. If they got him out of here and managed to treat the wound he might just about.

"I've got you," he said as he hooked his arms under Kyle's armpits and started to drag the younger man to the fence. Kyle screamed out in agony as the shock wore off and his nerves started to feel again. As Ellison dragged him rocks and bits of dirt got into the wound and touched raw flesh, feeling like someone had jammed a red hot iron straight through him. He screwed his eyes shut and his whole body tensed in blinding agony. Ellison pulled him over a sharp rock that caught against something inside his body cavity and set every nerve in his torso on fire. He screamed out as the most intense pain he'd ever felt in his life wracked through his whole body.

"I can't," Kyle groaned as Ellison stopped. "I'm fucked."

"I'm not leaving you here," Ellison calmly shook his head. He could hear Savannah and Derek calling for both of them from the fence and he looked back to see John and Cameron holding them both back. He carried on dragging Kyle towards the fence, straining to pull the weight behind him.

An HK soared over the main complex and cast its search beam down on Ellison and Kyle, bathing them in a brilliant white glow that lit the night into day and forced the pair of them to shield their eyes. Its plasma cannon unleashed a hailstorm of blue-white bolts that hammered the ground around them, consuming both Ellison and Kyle in luminous roiling flames mixed in with explosions of dirt thrown in all directions like a volcanic eruption.

Savannah froze on the spot and stared with wide, unblinking eyes at the explosion. Ellison – the man who'd looked after her since she was a little girl, who'd cared for her throughout the war and *always* put her first – her adoptive father for all intents and purposes, was gone. She felt numb and the world seemed to swirl around her in slow motion. *"Ellison,"* she breathed just barely, struggling to keep the tears from her eyes.

"KYLE!" Derek surged forwards towards the erupting black smoke but Cameron grabbed him and pulled him backwards. "Let me go!" he snarled at her as he struggled to get out of her grip. "Kyle needs me."

"He's gone," Cameron said, unrelenting. Derek spat in her face and smashed his rifle butt into her nose, to no avail.

"Get off me!" he roared at Cameron. "Fucking metal!"

John grabbed Derek and shook him like a rag doll, finding himself a hair away from smacking some sense into the man. "Forget him, he's gone!" John shouted loudly, sending flecks of spittle into Derek's face. He pushed Derek out away from the plant and towards the hills

and valleys to the south. He looked back and saw Savannah still stood there, staring. "I'm sorry but we've gotta go," he shook her – more gently than he had Derek. "Now."

They took off at a run as the HK circled round for another pass. Cameron took Savannah's M32 and aimed both it and her plasma rifle as the aircraft approached. She unleashed a storm of superheated plasma and 40mm grenades that surged upwards and hammered into its fuselage, igniting the fuel in its tanks and exploding brilliantly like a firework in the night sky.

"Light it up!" John shouted to Savannah. She finally snapped out of her stunned stupor and pulled out the detonator, pressing her thumb down on the button.

Explosions rocked the compound as the HK airfield went up with an almighty *boom* and the hydrogen fuel tanks of the HK erupted with enough force to detonate the other aircraft nearby, creating secondary explosions that tore the airfield to pieces and flashed bright orange and yellow in the air. More explosions went off inside the main complex, though without any windows inside they remained invisible to everyone outside. Alarms sounded all through the plant and instantly a swarm of service and fire control robots were released, approaching the flaming HK airfield, too close to the main complex and the reactors for either man's or machine's comfort.

"Let's go," John ordered them all. They'd created havoc now and it was their chance to escape. Cameron opened up a communication link with the other twelve AIUs waiting in a nearby valley and ordered them to attack all Skynet units – again not to damage the plant itself. She received twelve order confirmations as the endos moved forwards and put themselves between the humans and the plant, and attacked endos and fire control bots alike, adding to the utter mayhem all around.

John led them into the valley and away from Serrano Point, using the chaos behind them to slip away. They ran as fast as they could through the hilly terrain and back towards the camp, all of them

pushing themselves as hard as they could, with the exception of Cameron.

Cameron was the first to reach the camp and ran past Allison without even giving looking at her. One by one they all stopped behind the hill and Allison counted them all in: the metal, Connor, Derek and the ginger. They were two down and a cold lump of fear formed in her throat as she realised who was missing. *No, no, no, no; this* can't *be happening. Not him!* "Where's Kyle?"

"He's dead," John said. "I'm sorry."

Allison lunged forward and threw a fist into John's face, dropping him to the ground on his ass as he looked up at Cameron's enraged doppelganger. "You fucking bastard," she snarled at him, anger, loss and pure rage coursing through her. Kyle was dead because of him; she wanted to tear him limb from fucking limb. *"You* led us here and now he's dead because of you!"

Cameron moved towards Allison, intent on stopping her, but Savannah surged forwards like a flash and smashed her fist into Allison's face, knocking her back a step. *"I lost my best friend,"* she roared as she followed through with a punch to her stomach. She wasn't the only one who just lost someone she cared about; the selfish fucking bitch. Not to be outdone, Allison kicked at Savannah's knee and dropped her to the ground, and leapt at her. They rolled around on the ground, punching, scratching and screaming at each other. Allison yanked Savannah's hair, tearing out several strands and causing her to yell out in pain. A second later Savannah smashed her forehead into the bridge of Allison's nose, causing a gush of blood to stream out onto her jacket.

Cameron grabbed the pair of them by their jackets and hoisted both girls into the air, holding them both out of reach of each other. "Enough," she snapped firmly at them, her eyes glowing irritably. "Skynet will come after us; we have to move."

Savannah nodded down at Cameron as she swallowed deeply and tried to compose herself. "I'm okay," she told her. Cameron lowered the pair of them to the ground slowly and watched them in case they tried to restart the fight again. She was surprised at their behaviour; they were still in danger and they'd been preoccupied with fighting each other. She realised there were some things about humans she'd probably never understand.

John picked himself up off the ground and went to his rucksack. "Take out ammo and water," he told them as he fished spare shells from a pouch in his pack. "We're ditching everything else; we can't move quickly enough with all this stuff. We're moving in one minute."

Everyone went to their packs and fished out the most important items; some grabbed a few morsels of food and shoved them into pockets as well as ammunition and water bottles. John pulled out a few strips of leftover wild boar and quickly chewed on them before swallowing it down and swilling a mouthful of water after it. He pulled the drum magazine from his AA-12 and quickly reloaded it with another twenty shells before slotting it back into place.

Within one minute everyone was stood to and ready to move. "We head south," he told them. "Running until we're clear of Serrano. Cooper, Derek: take the rear. Cameron and I will take point." Both John and Cameron broke into a run down the hillside and across the rugged terrain, and the others followed after them. They all wanted to put as much distance between them and the plant as possible, now.

John kept looking skywards as he ran, dreading the sound of HKs after them; either some they missed in the plant or reinforcements from Vandenberg air base. They were in deep shit right now; all they could do was deal with it and move on if any of them hoped to make it back alive.

Chapter 20

Eight figures dashed through the open, barren plains of the former Los Padres National Forest; yet to reach the dense masses of large trees further south, the group was able to move quickly, choosing speed over stealth. They were on the clock and needed to be back before Skynet found a way to regain control of Serrano Point and redistributed power away from the TDE.

Savannah ran up at the front in point position and set the pace for the rest of the group. She ran quickly, stretching her stride further and further and pushing herself as hard as she could. Her calves and thighs burned from exertion and her chest ached as she sucked in each shallow breath, becoming harder and harder to get the air she needed with each stride. They'd been on the move for over twenty-four hours now since leaving Serrano Point, and running through the woods for just over two hours – ten or twelve miles, she reckoned. Though she'd have to ask Cameron to be sure, and right now she barely had the breath to speak a single word whilst she was still moving.

"Savannah, stop," John called out from the rear position, blurting the words out of his aching, parched throat and burning lungs. He and Cameron had elected to cover the group's tail end, mostly to alleviate Derek and his group's concerns that he'd simply leave them if anyone fell behind.

Savannah slowed down and halted, stopping the rest of the group behind her. "Rest for five minutes," John told them all. Several of the group leaned over double and panted heavily, struggling to get their breath back. Allison pulled out one of her canteens and took a long swig of water, gulping it down in long, slow mouthfuls. Despite the cold she was sweating from exertion and was sorely tempted to splash some over her face to cool down, but she knew if she did it

would suffer in the long run. She looked back north in the direction of Serrano Point, far away now, a day's marching away. Tears formed in her eyes and started to roll down her cheeks. She reached up and wiped them away but knew that wouldn't be enough. Cassie nuzzled her legs and rubbed her face into her thigh as she let out a low whine. Allison crouched down and pulled the dog into a hug, receiving a series of licks to her face in return. Cassie always seemed to know when something was wrong with Allison and was always there to comfort her.

"Kyle," Allison whispered under her breath. She just couldn't believe he was gone. They'd grown so close lately; she'd never felt anything like what she had for Kyle before. She wished more than anything she could have taken his place; been the one hit instead of him. She was going back to the past but it wouldn't be the same without him; the plans and ideas they'd had for a bright and shining future that now just seemed dull, hollow and empty. It wouldn't be the same without Kyle. *She* wouldn't be the same without him; not now.

Derek, too, was in mourning, though he hid it well. He crouched down on one knee and kept watch to the south, looking out for any signs of machines coming to intercept them. The tin can had said it'd cut off Skynet's communications in the plant but he wasn't going to just take its word for it; especially not after it and Connor had left four of his friends behind and just gotten Kyle killed. *We should have gone for Mexico,* he shook his head. They'd have cleared the border easier than this and would be far in the south of the country by now; either in one of the national parks or even further down, where the chances of growing food would be better. He didn't blame Connor for Kyle's death, however; he'd lost enough people over the years to know sometimes things just happen. It couldn't have been helped. That didn't make losing his brother any easier but nor would blaming anyone. Kyle would have died for nothing if they didn't get back and stop this shitty future from happening all over again.

Cameron watched Savannah stood motionless, clutching her rifle and staring out into the distance. She looked to Allison and saw the

tears rolling down her cheeks, and then back at Savannah – her face was blank, much like a machine's. Her posture wasn't slumped like Allison's and even Derek's. Her eyes weren't sad nor was she crying; she had the same look in her eyes Cameron had seen in resistance fighters in her future that been through especially traumatic experiences. They'd called it the 'thousand yard stare.'

"Why isn't she crying?" she asked John. She'd always thought people cried when they were upset; she'd seen John cry several times, and Sarah too on occasion.

John saw a little more than Cameron did – being more familiar with what Savannah must be feeling. "She's bottling it up," John said, remembering what Ellison had told her before, and what Savannah herself had said about keeping a lid on things. "Like I did after... my birthday."

Cameron understood that; John had avoided facing what had happened after she'd turned bad. He hadn't wanted to talk about it – she didn't understand why people did that when it was more harmful in the long run. But people weren't logical; it was one advantage they had over Skynet: it made them unpredictable.

"She's punishing herself," John told Cameron as he watched Savannah stood sentinel, completely motionless. "That's why she ran everyone ragged through the forest."

"It wasn't her fault," Cameron said.

John shook his head and realised Cameron still had a lot to learn about people. "It doesn't matter; she lived with Ellison for years, just the two of them. Survivor's guilt: he's gone and she's still here."

It didn't make sense to Cameron but she accepted John's word on it.

John looked out at the scene all around them: they were surrounded in all directions by miles and miles of hills and valleys, stretching out endlessly to the horizon and bathed in the blood red glow of the

setting sun. The desolate, deserted and dead wilderness seemed to go on forever, and reinforced the sense of complete isolation: they were in this alone and nobody was coming to help them. "How far have we gone?" he asked Cameron.

"Ninety-three miles," Cameron replied. She didn't bother reciting an exact decimal figure; it wasn't necessary. She'd learnt that sometimes with human interaction, less was more. "Sixty-nine miles to go," she added. The last part of the journey would be the most dangerous; back through the Angeles Forest and the dead trees, crossing the main supply route once more, and returning back to LA County. They would have to move underground again when they approached more built up areas.

John pulled his radio out and switched it once again to Weaver's frequency. "Weaver: come in."

The interior of the remnants of Zeiracorp's basement was completely still and silent, devoid of movement or any signs of life. If a person were to randomly enter the room they would see a decrepit, abandoned room full of dust, decay and debris, and would likely leave as quickly as they'd come, having seen the room was empty of anything remotely valuable. Four walls – relatively intact – ceiling and floor, and not much else. The only item of curiosity in sight was a single radio on the floor by the wall, as if forgotten by someone in their haste to leave. That and a small bloodstain on the floor were the only signs that anyone had ventured into the basement anytime recently.

"Weaver: come in." The radio squawked as the voice came through, garbled slightly by the concrete blocking some of the transmission, resulting in a static, grainy transmission.

One of the walls suddenly changed colour from a drab, dirty beige into gleaming chrome silver, and began to run down like thick liquid.

It oozed down like thick treacle onto the ground, raising up from the floor and taking shape, colours and textures changing, metamorphosing into a tall, striking brunette woman. Where the 'wall' had been was now a large, gaping hole. Inside it was the tall shape of the electromagnet, as well as the laptop, a series of wires and cables, and a single bloodied corpse.

Catherine Weaver reached down and picked up the radio. "Yes, John?" she replied. She hadn't expected to hear from him so soon.

"We've rerouted the power from Serrano Point. How are the repairs coming?"

"They're complete," Weaver said.

"That was fast."

Weaver smiled slightly – more a slight upturning of one corner of her mouth, as her eyes held no mirth whatsoever. "Without being distracted it went quicker than I expected." She stepped over the dead body in the hole in the wall – a tunnel rat who'd stumbled into the basement as she'd been working on the TDE, and been quickly disposed of with a single stab to the heart. "What's your condition?" she asked him.

"We lost a few people... Ellison's gone. We're on our way: we'll be back within twenty-four hours."

"I'll be ready," Weaver replied flatly. She turned off the radio and opened up the laptop, taking it out of standby. She activated the TDE's basic functions and ran a diagnostic program – she'd already run one but she was nothing if not thorough. The diagnostic ran a number of tests by itself and Weaver simply waited for it to finish. It didn't take long and she quickly read the findings: all systems were functional and there were no issues with the TDE or the buffer she'd created.

A message box appeared on the screen: *All systems functional. No errors found. Enter temporal coordinates.*

Weaver typed the date into the temporal coordinates: October 15th 2009 – two weeks after they'd left for the future. Once she'd input the coordinates and pressed *Enter* the screen changed to another dialogue box. *Temporal coordinates confirmed: 15-09-2009. Press* Enter *to initialise time displacement equipment.*

She pressed *Enter* again and a number of LEDs on the electromagnet immediately winked to life. A low humming started up from all around as the other buried electromagnets all activated and the superconductors started to build up a charge. The buffer she'd created winked online as LEDs and lights came on and off and flashed periodically. Another dialogue box appeared on the laptop's screen, this one had a status bar that ran across most of the screen. *Insufficient power to activate: switching systems to buffer. Estimated time until TDE buffer reaches optimum charge: 25 hours, 4 minutes.*

She was actually rather satisfied that some of the humans allied with John had been lost: fewer people meant less resistance when they realised the likelihood that they would in all probability only have enough time for one transition back, and there was only limited space inside the sphere. She, Cameron and John would return to 2009, there would be little room left in the sphere after, perhaps enough for one person. She'd never seen what would happen if part of a human or machine remained outside the sphere during the temporal transition – either the bubble would collapse and nothing would happen, or said body part would be severed. Either way John's promise to take the others back would be a broken one. It wasn't her intention to leave the others in the future but it was a matter of priorities: she, Cameron and John mattered. The others did not. Their past selves could still be saved if they prevented Skynet; the future incarnations were irrelevant.

John went over to Savannah and Cameron followed behind him. He pulled out his canteen and took a long swig of the water inside, grateful for the liquid soothing his parched throat. They'd really needed this rest stop, he realised. He stopped next to Savannah and watched her staring out to the horizon but she didn't even seem to register him approaching. He hesitated for a moment, not sure of what to say. He'd cried when Charley had died – the man would have been like a father to him if he'd had the chance to – but this wasn't on the same level and he knew it. *What can I say to her? She lived with Ellison, day in day out, for eighteen years, and now he's gone.* He realised there really was nothing he could say to help her, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try. He looked around and saw Allison with Derek, Cooper and the others. She at least had her other friends to grieve with. Savannah had no one.

"I know it won't help," John said as he stepped up to her and put his hand on her shoulder, "but I'm sorry." He really meant it, too: Ellison, with Savannah, had dedicated their entire lives to getting him back to the past, and now he'd made the ultimate sacrifice to make sure it had happened.

To his surprise Savannah didn't react the way he'd thought she would; no violent moves or snapping his hand clean off the wrist. She just remained still, looking out into the endlessly rolling rocky hills to the south. "Me too," she said meekly, her voice croaking slightly. She was the only one besides Cameron who hadn't drank or eaten anything yet whilst they were resting. She looked at John and he saw the hardness in her face cracking, just for a moment, and he saw the vulnerable, sad little girl he'd met nearly two decades ago.

"I'm gonna miss him," John told her honestly.

Savannah nodded at John slowly. She'd miss him more than John could ever understand. "He looked after me since I was little; when I ran away he risked his life to find me, nursed me back to health and didn't leave my side once, and he just died trying to save Kyle – someone he didn't even know. That's the kind of guy he was: he always put everyone else before himself."

John saw a flicker of moisture in her eyes and wondered what he should do. Anyone else he'd try to comfort, but he didn't think that would go down so well with her. Savannah didn't take kindly to being consoled. At least not by anyone but Ellison, and now he was gone it was back to no one again. Seeing Savannah so broken and in pain broke his heart and he just didn't know what to do to help. "Cameron and me are always here," he said to her. "If you need anything."

Cameron handed her a canteen of water. "Drink it," she told her. There was no resistance from Savannah; she took the container from her hands and slowly, mechanically drank down a few mouthfuls before handing it back to Cameron. "We have to go," she told Savannah. "Take point and head south." The redhead nodded sullenly and her expression hardened again. She blinked the beginnings of tears away and hard, grim resolve set into her features, as well as a heightened sense of vigilance as she scoured the ground around her for any signs of machines and set off once more.

"We're moving," Cameron told the rest of them. Immediately they were up on their feet. Canteens were shoved back into pouches and foil food wrappers were stuffed into pockets as eight pairs of boots and four paws started marching once more.

After Savannah went Cooper and Myers, followed by Allison, Cassie and Derek, and Torrance, spread out in a long line. John and Cameron again took the rear and covered the group's six. "Why did you tell Savannah to move on?" John asked her. She'd been pretty abrupt about it literally just after offering her water; seemed pretty callous to him.

"To keep her busy," Cameron replied. She'd made her own conclusions about Savannah based on what she'd seen and what John had told her: Savannah had suspended grieving whilst they were still on mission and suppressed her emotions. If she grieved now she might be unable to continue. She needed to be distracted. Cameron was saddened too by his death: John Henry had been attached to him and those feelings were now hers. Ellison had also

kept John safe when she couldn't. He had devoted his entire life after they'd gone to keeping Savannah safe and ensuring John goes safely back to the past; she understood that very well. She'd miss him too.

John nodded, understanding and also surprised. Just when he thought he had Cameron figured out she showed another side to herself. She'd understood Savannah better than he had.

Savannah stretched out her stride and broke into a run once again, forcing the others behind her to pick up the pace to keep up with her. Her muscles ached and burned still and begged her to slow down and rest, and she could feel large blisters under on the balls of and under the arches of her feet but she ignored the pain and pushed herself onwards. She could rest when she was back in the past or dead. Behind her she could hear the others' laboured breathing as the struggled to push on, but she carried on unrelenting. John wanted to be back in twenty four hours and they'd have to move slower once they were back in the sewers under LA, so they had to pick up the slack here. The M32 was secured to her tightly but the weapon's butt kept smacking her backside with each stride, it was almost like a beat keeping her going. She concentrated hard on keeping her pace: *one foot in front of the other. Breathe. Avoid the loose rock. Watch the horizon.* Anything to avoid thinking about Ellison; watching him go back for Kyle, seeing the HK roar overhead and strafing with its plasma cannon, helpless to act as they disappeared in a roiling explosion of earth and superheated gas...

She shook her head vigorously like a dog drying itself, shaking the image from her mind. *One foot in front of the other...*

They carried on for miles through the endless, barren and rocky terrain, running up and down hills, through valleys, and going on and on in what seemed an infinite dead wilderness. It was so deserted, so lifeless and so cold, that they could have been on the moon.

The faint sound of jet engines whined in the distance and rapidly grew closer. The sleek aircraft form shot up from a concealed valley

half a mile to their right and tore towards them straight towards them. "HK!" Cameron called out. She instantly pushed John to the ground and covered his body with hers as the others all scattered and dived down and scrambled for whatever cover they could find.

The HK's search beam lit up and cast its glow down on them as it soared overhead. It instantly caught Allison and Derek and lit them up like a Christmas tree. Derek shoved Allison as hard as he could, pushing her out of its beam, and he stared up at the thing, knowing there was nothing he could do to stop the inevitable plasma fire that would shatter his body and flash boil what was left in an instant.

To his surprise no shot came. The HK swept its beam across the ground and caught most of them. It shut the beam off and pulled up high into the air, leaving them be.

"What the hell's it doing?" Allison shouted out, staring up at the thing and, although grateful it hadn't killed Derek as well, she was suspicious why it had just left them alone like that. She'd never seen an HK act like that before.

Cameron tracked its movement and watched it fly up into the air. It pulled up to an altitude of 5,500 metres – far out of range of any of their weapons. "It's tracking us," she said. Skynet wouldn't be able to track the redirected power from Serrano Point to Zeiracorp because of the damage they'd caused; instead it had sent out units to hunt for them. Cameron thought it likely Skynet had mobilized almost every HK from Vandenberg air base to scour the area. "It's going to follow us."

"So what do we do?" Torrance asked.

"Split up," Derek said. "It can't follow all of us."

John shook his head and looked up at the thing, barely visible high up in the darkening sky. Nightfall would come soon. "No; we'll have to meet up again eventually. We'd lead it straight back to Zeiracorp." They needed to take it out and quickly; the HK wasn't firing at them

but he'd bet his right arm it was vectoring other units towards them, ready to follow wherever they go, and attack once they got there. If they didn't get rid of the HK soon the machines would cast a net from which they'd never get out.

He looked out to the hills and valleys to their south; some of them ran extremely high and the valleys dipped down very low. One particular valley to the southeast ran several hundred metres below the steep hills on either side, and he could see from where he was that the valley was covered in rocky outcrops and structures they could hide in. He turned to look at Cameron and noted the RPG still slung over her back and an idea came to mind.

"Head into the valley down there," John pointed to where he'd been looking. "We run there, get in and split up. If the HK wants to track us it'll have to fly in closer for a better look." He turned back to Cameron. "You run up to the top of the hill, lay low out of sight, and when it moves in close, take it out with the RPG."

"That can work," she agreed with a small smile. He was thinking more and more like his future self. Though there was something he hadn't considered. "Shoot me," she told him.

"What?" John stared at her, mouth agape with disbelief. "Why would I shoot you?" What the hell was she talking about?

"Skynet sees what the HK sees," she explained. If the HK sees me not following you it could sense a trap." Skynet could take direct control of the HK and keep it out of harm's way, and keep it tracking them from a distance. "Shoot me and Skynet will see it; it will think you killed me and moved on."

"I'll do it," Allison enthusiastically raised her rifle. Derek also shouldered his plasma rifle and turned towards Cameron.

"No," John pushed Allison's M4 barrel down and held his hand out at Derek, slowly shaking his head at them. He wasn't going to let them do anything to Cameron, especially not with a plasma rifle. And if

Allison fired at Cameron chances were she wouldn't stop. It was a good plan and he knew it, but still he wasn't going to let them open up on her. "I'll do it," he said.

Savannah stepped up and pulled one of her pistols out from its thigh holster. She handed it to John and he pointed it at Cameron's chest, fingered the trigger, and hesitated, still holding the gun and shaking slightly.

Cameron sensed his reluctance to shoot her. She knew he felt attached to her. She didn't say anything, she locked eyes with him and nodded once, telling him it was okay.

John paused for a moment and took a breath. She was a terminator: a 9mm couldn't do squat to her. He breathed out and tapped the trigger. The gun barked loudly in his hand and the round tore through the air and struck Cameron in the forehead. She dropped like a stone and fell to the ground, where she lay unmoving. She looked up at John and winked once, then stared ahead at the ground.

John gave the pistol back to Savannah and shouldered his battle rifle again. "Let's get moving," he told the others. He took off in a sprint to the south, tearing over the rocky terrain as fast as he could. Adrenaline surged through his system and pushed him on faster and harder; he barely even noticed the burning in his muscles and he suddenly felt lighter than air; his boots barely seemed to touch the ground.

Savannah followed close after him, as were Derek and the others as they made their way quickly down the low ground towards the edge of the valley. Soon the hills rose up above on either side of them and cast their shadows over the group in the failing light. "Split up," John told them as they went deeper into the valley – almost a canyon; the hills on either side were that steep. He looked back behind him and saw the HK was still on their tail. He pushed on forwards and saw that Savannah had veered off to the right, Derek to the left, and Torrance and Allison dashed on forwards behind him for a hundred yards or so before splitting up and disappearing into rock formations.

John kept going straight forward until he saw the peaks of one hill above him. He saw a rocky dip in the ground to his right, just wide enough to fit inside. He scrambled for it and ducked down into it, curling up into a ball and looking upwards at the aircraft hovering above. Its searchlight beamed on again and swept through the valley, searching for them. There was no way the HK wouldn't see him hiding in it but that didn't matter; he didn't want it to lose him; Quite the opposite, in fact.

Cameron waited until the HK followed after John and the others before she got up to her feet. As she'd told John before, she could feel; even pain, of a sort. The bullet had bounced off her hyperalloy skull and fallen to the ground, but the burnt, torn flesh of her forehead was irritating. She sprinted out towards the hill on the right hand side of the valley where John was hiding. The HK flew lazily after them and she tracked its movement, speed and altitude as it followed. It descended lower as they moved deeper into the valley, and Cameron pushed herself as fast as she could go – significantly putting the fastest human athletes ever born to shame.

She quickly accelerated to 26.43 miles per hour – on smoother terrain she'd be able to approach 30mph but having to avoid obstacles on the rocky ground slowed her slightly. Still, she moved so fast that she reached the base of the hill not long after John and the others started down into the valley. She watched the HK descend lower and activate its searchlight, hunting for them.

She dashed up the hill and slowed down as she reached the top. She crouched low and got down on one knee as she put the plasma rifle down and unslung the RPG, positioning it over her shoulder and taking aim at the HK hovering overhead. It was now at an altitude of only 1000 metres above her, having descended low to keep track of John and the others, down in the valley below. It was an extreme range for the primitive, Soviet-era weapon, and she knew exactly why John had selected her to fire it. She took aim through the sights and centred the crosshairs over the aircraft's fuselage.

She pulled the trigger and the rocket tore out of the launcher with a resounding *whoosh* and a fiery backblast behind her. The projectile shot through the air with a smoky plume and tore a straight line up into the air, taking several seconds to close the distance to the target. It smashed into the HK; the armour piercing warhead penetrated through the thin aluminium hull of the aircraft and erupted inside it, blasting the fuselage apart like a firecracker inside a watermelon. The engines on either side were blown clean off their mounts and the flaming, torn wreckage of the HK plummeted and smashed into the hillside, halfway down. The fuel tanks split open and hydrogen burned as it flowed down the rocky hill like liquid fire.

Cameron looked down the hillside and scanned for the others. "John?" she called out, searching for him in the darkness of the valley. Suddenly she thought about all the burning shrapnel from the exploding HK: there was a chance he might have been hit but it was more than too much for her. *What if he's hurt?* She asked herself. *What if I've killed him?*

Cameron slung the rocket launcher over her back once more, snatched up the plasma rifle and took off running down the hill; an overwhelming sense of urgency took over her and she called out to him as she ran down. She jumped off a rocky ledge and plummeted fifty metres to the slope below. She bent her knees as she hit and her legs absorbed the impact as the loose rocks beneath her flew outward from the force of her landing. She looked down at the valley floor below and identified Savannah, Myers, Allison and Torrance starting to emerge from their hiding places, followed by Derek a few seconds later. She scanned for John frantically, feeling the closest thing she ever could to panic, switching between her modes of vision from normal to infrared and back again, trying to pick up another signature.

Finally she spotted a partial one in a large hole in the ground, obscured by more rocks above. She ran down into the valley towards it and switched her vision back to normal. "John?" she called out to him again as she approached. John stood up out of the

small trench and looked at the wreckage all around. Part of one jet engine had hit the ground only a few metres away and both John and Cameron immediately knew if it had been any closer or if he hadn't hidden in the trench, he'd have been killed.

"I'm sorry," she said to him. "I was reckless." She shouldn't have shot the HK down without knowing exactly where he was; although that was the only chance they were likely to have had, and logically she knew now that where John was hiding was out of her field of vision up on the hilltop and there'd be no way to verify it without giving herself away and allowing the HK to escape; she shouldn't have risked his life like that. She didn't know why she'd done it. She wouldn't let herself risk him again.

She raised her hand to his neck and cupped his jaw in her palm, scanning him but also running her thumb along his face, feeling the stubble along his jaw line that made him more closely resemble his future self.

"I'm fine," John said to her. He reached up for her hand to pull it away, knowing what she was doing, but stopped once he had her hand in his. He took a moment and realised she was just concerned about him. She cared about him, and he let her carry on; deep down he realised he actually liked it – both her scanning and rubbing his jaw, and the fact she cared so much about him. He wondered: he'd come through time because of what she meant to him – and she'd said before she could feel – could she feel the same way?

"I don't want to lose you," Cameron said, ceasing her rubbing of his jaw and just cupping his face with her hand.

Is that my answer? John wondered as he stared at her for a moment. Unconsciously he grabbed her forearm and held it in place, turned his head towards her hand and gently brushed his lips against her palm, lightly kissing the pad at the base of her thumb and noting how soft and smooth her skin was even after a week of roughing it. He took a step closer and leaned down towards her face, closing his eyes as he parted his lips an inch away from hers.

Savannah cleared her throat near them and snapped John back to reality. He quickly let go of Cameron's hand and turned towards her, looking around to see if anyone else had seen him and her. He could hardly believe what he'd almost done, right out in the open. *Stupid, John,* he chided himself. What if someone else had seen that? He thought, dreading what the response to that might be.

"All clear," Savannah said, turning away from them as Derek approached.

"Nice shot," Derek conceded to Cameron. He had to admit, none of them could have made it. He'd used similar antitank rockets before and the HK looked like it had been just on the edge of its range; another fifty metres further away and the missile would have just cooked off and exploded harmlessly.

"That was pretty good," Torrance nodded to her, impressed. One advantage of having metal with them, he supposed.

The group got back into formation with Savannah at the front again and John and Cameron at the back, but this time Savannah set a quick march rather than a dead run, and they made their way nervously forward – eyes darting left and right and up into the surrounding hills, searching for signs of anymore machines lurking as they marched out of the valley and back into the vast network of hills.

Cameron led the way through the tunnel, using her flawless recollection of the route she'd taken after arriving in the future to navigate through the complex system of basements, subbasements and sewers. Derek, Allison and the others knew the way just as well but she'd insisted on taking the point position in case any machines were stalking through the tunnels.

John was behind her and he noticed as the sewer system gave way to a series of tunnels that started to seem more familiar. The ground was wet and dank and the last time he'd been here his feet had been bare. His boots stamped down into stagnant, shitty brown water on the ground and he found himself glad that he was better attired for his return to this charming little part of the city.

Finally their destination came into sight; the collapsed wall that gave way to Zeiracorp's basement, where his entire ordeal had started. He wasn't even sure how long he'd been in the future for now; it felt like he'd spent an entire lifetime in the future and the past seemed like little more than a distant memory. But now the promise of going back was only fifty yards away, just behind that wall.

He heard the low thrumming whine of the TDE before he even entered the room. As he stepped inside he saw Weaver standing in the middle of the room, typing on the laptop, balanced on a liquid metal shelf sticking out from her stomach.

"You're back," Weaver commented as John and Cameron entered, followed by the others as they filtered into the room. She didn't look up from what she was doing and didn't sound particularly interested; as if they'd only been gone a few minutes to get a newspaper from the corner store.

"Is it ready?" John asked her. He wasn't surprised by her indifferent attitude at all. He'd learnt she was strictly business: no consideration for anything else but the job in hand and she'd already made it clear that all the others were nothing more than expendable assets in her eyes. He even reckoned that if he or Cameron were killed she'd just fire up the TDE and go back a few minutes before the event, snatch their ten-minutes-or-so-ago selves and use the machine in that time to go back to the past. So technically even they were expendable, he thought.

"Thirty-eight minutes," Weaver told him.

John leaned back against the wall and his legs sagged beneath him. He slid down until he was sat on his backside on the floor, exhausted. He unclipped his webbing and pulled a water canteen from one of the pouches, took off the cap and swigged it all down. "Might as well rest for half an hour," John told everyone else. The Serrano Point mission had been a week's round trip – the return had been two days of constant marching with only one five-minute rest, just before the HK had appeared. After that they'd quick marched an hour at a time followed by half an hour of running. He was exhausted to say the least, and he could see the toll it had taken on the others as they too flopped down onto the ground and dug out the last droplets of water from their canteens. Cameron stood upright and still held her plasma rifle. Until they were back in 2009 she wouldn't be satisfied John was safe.

Savannah sat down in one corner and felt the vibrations against her back from one of the electromagnets, still beneath the concrete, as it gathered power slowly. She hadn't listened to Weaver's explanation of how the TDE was supposed to work: partly because she had no interest in anything the liquid metal freak had to say; and also because science just wasn't her thing. Advanced quantum physics, or whatever the hell it was called, went right over her head. She didn't need to know what made it work, just as long as it did.

She noticed a foot sticking out from the hole in the wall where the exposed electromagnetic tower was located and decided to get up and investigate. She saw the dead body of a tunnel rat laid out on the ground with a large red stab wound in the chest. She could see the breastbone just underneath the neat, surgically precise incision and saw that it had been cleaved in half. Weaver's handiwork for sure, she thought. She stared at the T-1001 and her hand unconsciously slid down to the pistol on her thigh holster. She wouldn't put it past the bitch to slaughter everyone she didn't deem as absolutely necessary, and that included her.

"I'm gonna sleep for a month when we get back," Torrance groaned as he took out a strip of dried meat from a foil back and stuffed it into

his mouth.

"And eat everything in sight," Myers said with a grin. "First stop: McDonald's!"

Derek looked at Myers with an expression of pure, unadulterated horror on his face. "Seriously: *McDonald's?"* he stared in disbelief.

"What?" Myers looked at him, confused.

"Your first real meal sixteen years and you're gonna eat *McDonald's?* Might as well stick to dead rats and algae."

"So what're you gonna have, Reese?" Torrance asked.

Derek lipped his lips at the thought. He'd already given this some serious consideration and already knew his answer. "When Kyle and I were kids we'd play baseball in the park on Saturdays, and there was always this guy with a hotdog stand there. Best I ever tasted." His mouth was practically watering already from the thought and his stomach grumbled. He ignored it – used to being starving, it was almost a steady state condition for them all. What he couldn't ignore was the pain he felt at the memories, knowing Kyle wouldn't be there with him to play ball or eat hotdogs together.

As painful as it was for him, he looked to Allison sat alone in another corner and realised it was probably worse for her. She and Kyle only had a short time together but he'd watched both of them growing up and getting closer. He was surprised it had taken them that long to hook up. But now that had been torn from Allison and she was all alone again, save for Cassie. The dog sat faithfully by her mistress, her head and paws resting on Allison's thigh.

"What about you?" he asked Allison. "What's your first meal gonna be?"

"I don't care," she said quietly. She wasn't bothered what they'd eat; it would all taste pretty much the same without Kyle there. She didn't

want to think of food now anyway. She poured the last of the water into the palm of her hand and let Cassie eagerly lick it up, lapping loudly with her tongue before Allison wiped it off on her trousers after the dog had finished.

John saw Cameron stood sentinel at the entrance to the room, facing outwards away from them. He got up back to his feet and stood next to her, trying to see what she was staring at. All he could see was vacant, empty tunnels. "What is it?" John asked nervously. He strained his ears and heard a low rumbling from above.

"Centaur patrol," Cameron replied. She could hear its heavy tracks up above them on the surface as it rolled along the ground.

"They patrol here all the time," Derek shrugged.

"There are more vehicles," Cameron said. She could hear not just tracks but what sounded like several sets of wheels as well. "Come with me," she told John. "Bring your weapons."

John nodded nervously and clipped his webbing back on, slid the straps over his shoulders and pulled the slings for both the HK417 and the AA12 over him. He turned to the others. "Stay here; we'll be back."

Together John and Cameron bolted out of the basement and back through the sewer tunnels, splashing filthy water beneath them with each step. John still felt exhausted from the trek and could barely believe he could still run. He felt like his body was going to fall apart any moment.

"What are we looking for?" he asked her between ragged, shallow breaths.

"Manhole cover," Cameron answered as she continuously swept the ceiling above them for any sign of one they could use. They tried one but it was under a ton of debris and Cameron didn't even attempt to push against it. They continued on until they were roughly two blocks

from the Zeiracorp basement, and found another manhole. The ladder leading up to the surface had been damaged and the upper rungs were missing. The top of the tunnel was slightly over eight feet high and although she could jump that she had nothing to hold on to beneath the manhole cover, the hole in the ceiling below it being made of smooth concrete. "I need a lift up," she said.

John crouched down on one knee in front of her and cupped his hands over the kneecap of his left leg. Cameron placed one of her feet into the palms of his hands and pushed up as John raised himself, lifting her up higher until she could reach out and steady herself on the concrete ledge just below the metal cover.

John felt himself straining under her weight; she wasn't really any heavier than a normal girl would be but he'd been on the move for a week, constantly on the run for two days, and hadn't eaten a thing for three. Hunger and fatigue were taking their toll.

"Hold it there," Cameron gently told him as she reached up and slowly pushed the manhole cover upwards. She pushed it up out of the way and clutched onto the ground above with both hands as she pulled her body upwards until her head poked out the top of the hole and she could see above the surface. She looked around and saw nothing in her immediate field of vision; rubble obscured her view to some extent so she lifted her whole body clear of the tunnel and crawled slowly towards the sounds of tracks and wheels rolling slowly.

Her aural senses were far superior to any living creatures' apart from perhaps bats, and she instantly identified the source of what she was hearing, and matched sound patterns to those in her flawless memory. The results weren't promising. She poked her head up above the rubble to make a visual ID. Beyond the rubble, some two hundred metres away down the road, was the shattered stump of the Zeiracorp tower; it had been sheared in half by the nuclear blasts and the skeletal steel frames stuck out from the crumbling concrete walls. The base was surrounded by piles of rubble from the top half of the skyscraper where it had collapsed in on itself. On the road,

just down from the obliterated remains, a Centaur and two armoured troop carriers, plus their towed trailers, were parked. Hatches on the sides of the vehicles were open and machines stepped outside, wielding plasma rifles. Some armed with two each whilst others only held one. High in the air above them three HKs hovered, covering the ground units. There was only one reason so many machines would have been mobilised to this sector of Downtown LA and why they were assembled directly above them: Skynet had found them.

Cameron backed away towards the manhole and lowered herself down, placing the cover as quietly as she could back into place before she dropped down to face a nervous and expectant John. "What's going on?" he asked, knowing it couldn't be good.

Cameron looked at John and allowed her face to express to him the urgent worry she felt. "We have company."

Chapter 21

John and Cameron sprinted through the tunnels towards the basement and all thoughts of tiredness had been abandoned in the former as he pushed himself on, knowing seconds were going to count. He entered the basement level of the tower, bolted through the corridor and into the hole in the wall that led to the TDE chamber.

Derek saw John burst into the room and recognised the look of abject fear on his face. "What is it?" he asked, suddenly feeling very afraid himself.

"Metal!" John blurted out. "They found us."

"Two armoured troop carriers – thirty-to-forty endoskeletons," Cameron added.

"Fuck!" Torrance snapped and looked up at the ceiling. "Give us a goddamn fucking break!" he shouted out to any deities that might be listening, and wondering what the hell they'd done to piss them off.

"Stand to!" Derek snapped at the others. They all instantly grabbed their weapons, vests and belts. Savannah clipped on her webbing belt and checked her weapons and ammo. She had plenty of ammunition left for the HK417 but only five grenades left for the M32. *Shit.*

"What's the plan?" she asked John. Though she wasn't sure what plan they could exactly use against thirty endos; they were pretty much fucked.

John turned to Weaver, still monitoring her laptop. "How long until it's ready to go?"

"Thirty-one minutes," she answered.

"Machines will take us all out in less than five," Cooper muttered.

"They're looking for a way in," Cameron told him. "It will take them time to find manhole covers.

"Then we wait by the nearest manholes and blow them away as they drop through one by one," Allison growled. "They can only get through one at a time: we smash the metals into junk as they do."

Weaver knew the layout of Zeiracorp better than anyone and also knew Skynet's tactics well. "That's a bad idea," she stared at Allison as if she were a teacher addressing a particularly stupid child, earning a scowl from Cameron's human twin.

"They have HKs," Cameron added. "They'll blast a wider opening."

"The best idea," Weaver said, "is to lure them through the tower above."

She had a point, John thought: the remains of the building above them would be masses of rubble and shattered walls and debris that would provide them with cover and obstacles to throw in front of the machines. "We'd better make sure the staircase is still intact," he added. If not then that plan would go straight out the window. A more urgent thought came to mind and he pulled out the very last block of Semtex they had, went over to the exposed electromagnetic tower and stuck it onto the far side, out of sight from anyone who didn't know what to look for, along with the remote control.

Allison looked at him strangely, wondering what the hell he was doing attaching explosives to the TDE.

"We can't let Skynet get its hands on this," he explained. "Once we're all through we've gotta make sure the TDE is destroyed. This one will go off ten seconds after the button's pressed."

"Makes sense," she shrugged.

Derek led everyone out the room towards the staircase leading to the surface but Weaver reached out and grabbed John. "We need to talk," she told him.

"I'll catch up," John said to Derek. He turned around to face Weaver and Cameron remained by his side. "What is it?" he asked.

"There's only time for one transition," she told him.

"And..." John stared at her, not getting her point.

"There's limited space in the sphere," Cameron replied, understanding what Weaver meant. "We won't all fit in."

"Wait a second," John said accusingly to Cameron, his eyes widening in shock as he took in what she was saying. They'd have to leave people behind. "You *knew* about this?"

"I didn't expect Skynet to find us this quickly," she replied. She'd genuinely believed they would have had time to send several bubbles back, given all the damage she'd done to Serrano Point's power distribution systems and effectively rendering the AI blind in the region. "I'm sorry," she added.

John nodded sullenly. He believed her, accepted it wasn't her fault. "How am I supposed to tell them all?" he asked.

"Don't," Weaver replied simply. She saw John opening his mouth to protest but she cut him off before he could say a word. "The three of us have to go back; the rest won't accept it: they'll fight over who gets to go. The machines will break through before the TDE's ready.

John froze for a moment, stricken with indecision. He couldn't believe the cold callousness of what Weaver was suggesting. It was just so completely, sickeningly wrong, but at the same time he could see she was right as well: they had to do whatever it took to hold the machines off or none of them would go back. So many people had already died because they'd followed him and now more would have

to be abandoned after risking their lives for him; it made him sick to his stomach and he didn't know if he'd ever be able to forgive himself.

He turned away from Weaver, disgusted with her as well as himself, and left the TDE room to follow after the others. Cameron remained by his side the entire time as he quickly jogged down the corridor, passing several more empty doorways and turning the corner to see the staircase forty feet down the passage. They ran up it and emerged through the wide doorway at the top into the ground floor.

The pristine, spotless and immaculate corridors he'd seen when he'd last been here were gone, replaced by a labyrinth of rust and ruin. It looked like half the tower had caved in on itself and sent masses of steel, glass and concrete plummeting down into the building. Everywhere he looked steel girders and piles of concrete create scores of obstacles and dozens of places to hide, and that was just in the corridor; the lobby would be even more of a mess. *Perfect,* he thought. It was the exact kind of rubble he imagined his father, uncle, and his future self used to hide in, attack, and then melt away into the iron and concrete jungle before any surviving machines could counterattack.

"Derek!" he called out, not seeing him or anyone else. "Savannah!"

Derek appeared from behind a large concrete right-angle with steel poles protruding that had probably once made up the corner of the building. "What's the verdict?" Derek asked John. Allison, Savannah and the others filtered in from various other sections, seeming to appear from nowhere and reinforcing John's decision to use the place.

"This is where we make our stand," he told them. He turned to Cameron, "time?"

"Twenty-eight minutes," she told him. She was constantly keeping track of how much longer they had left before the TDE was ready. To be safe she'd deducted thirty seconds off the deadline.

"Hell of a long time," Allison said.

"We can hold them here," John replied. "Set up defensive positions from the building's entrance and all the way in. We draw them in and give them something inviting – us. Hold as long as we can in each spot and then move to the next." He looked at them all and saw nervousness on every face, even Savannah's, though she was doing her best to hide it well.

"Timing's gonna be critical," he added. "Don't fall back too late, or too early: we need to keep them interested so they don't try to find another way in, but don't wait too long or you'll be overrun."

"Target their plasma rifles," Cameron told them. "Stop them shooting back and they'll have to kill you with their hands; you'll have more time to fall back."

Savannah turned towards the group and pulled up her bandolier of grenades. She picked a few of the explosive orbs and handed them around to everyone; one per person.

Cameron had her own concerns; she only had twenty-four shots left in her plasma rifle; she needed to acquire one from any endos they eliminated.

"So that's it," John said. "Lure them through here, hold them as long as we can and fall back in stages to the TDE: any questions?"

"Just the one," Cooper piped up. "How do we make them come through *here* and not somewhere else?"

John led Cameron down the stairs and into the basement corridor. Everyone else but Weaver was up top, and she was in the TDE room making last minute alterations and monitoring any changes to the

TDE, looking out for any problems that may arise. It was just them, and that's exactly how he wanted it.

Cameron looked at him quizzically. She didn't know what he was doing, moments before they were about to engage the machines. "We should be preparing," she told him. "We don't have long."

"This won't take long," John said as he led her around the corner and stopped there. He reached for her hand and held it gently in his, unconsciously running his thumb along her knuckles. He closed the distance between them, leaving only inches between their bodies as he looked squarely at her, locking their gazes together. "There's a good chance none of us will make it; you know that, right?"

Cameron saw something in his eyes she couldn't identify. He was nervous, which was natural, she thought, given what they were about to do. But there was something else; his expression was softer, a slight smile on his lips even as he admitted they had a low probability of survival. "I know," she said. She knew the exact probability but decided it was best not to mention it and to let him say what he wanted to.

"I've been thinking about Allison and Kyle; how she said to him life's too short: she was right." He took a nervous breath before continuing. "I'm sorry, Cameron: I'm sorry I treated you the way I did after my birthday. I shouldn't have: it was wrong and you deserved better." Jesus Christ, he thought to himself: that was an understatement. She'd saved his life day in and day out, always looking out for him, and he'd repaid her with complete hostility and running off with Riley.

Cameron curled her lips upwards in a slight smile. She recalled how he'd behaved towards her and she'd been confused by it. She didn't like it when she couldn't guarantee his safety, and she was uncomfortable not being around him. She realised it meant a lot to her that he said it, and she could tell from his facial expression and his vital signs that he meant what he was saying.

"I'm sorry too," she squeezed his hand gently, finding pleasure in the tactile contact between them. "For trying to kill you."

"To be fair," John said with a slight grin, "I was an annoying little shit back then; I probably had it coming." *Fuck it,* he thought. *Allison was right: life* is *too short.* He leaned his head down, closed his eyes and pressed his lips gently against hers, surprised at how soft and warm they were as his head started to spin. Cameron didn't move for a moment, she hesitated, unsure how to respond. She smiled against his lips, strangely enjoying the sensation and the intimacy. She didn't know why she liked it but she did. She kept her eyes open as she parted her lips and kissed him back, and decided after they returned to the present they would have to explore this in more detail.

John reluctantly pulled away and they stared at each other for a long moment, both knowing that this was unfamiliar ground they were treading on and unsure of the next move.

"That was nice," Cameron said, a slight smile still parting her lips. John simply nodded, still holding her hand. He didn't know what would happen between them now but he was adamant they'd both survive to find out.

What the hell am I doing out here? Savannah stepped slowly and quietly forward through the piles of rubble and collapsed ceiling as she made her way out through Zeiracorp's front entrance, the hairs stood out on the back of her neck and a chill ran down her spine. She crept forward, inching along and making sure she stepped as gently as possible, taking great care not to accidentally kick anything loose or tread on anything that might crunch under her boots.

She stepped out into the dark night air and heard the whirring of HK engines to the south, behind the building. She saw a few endos marching out away from the building, searching for a way in. The main entrance had caved in and been reduced to a space so small

only a single person could barely squeeze through; meaning it would bottleneck the machines' entry but also force her to move like shit off a shovel before she got tagged by plasma fire. She stepped out away from the building and tried to push down the sheer fear that came naturally from being out in the open in the middle of LA, surrounded by three dozen endos searching for them. For the hundredth time she checked all her weapons were in place: HK417, M32, both pistols, both knives, and the three grenades on her bandolier. She still felt too lightly armed.

She looked around and counted the endos she could see: three were in her immediate sight but she knew once they'd spotted her the rest would converge. She raised the rifle above her head, took in a deep breath - pumping herself up for what could be a very short fight if things went wrong - and roared out at the top of her voice; a deep, animalistic scream of rage and aggression, using the anger and pain at losing Ellison to fuel her as she bellowed out a war cry as loud as she could, calling out a challenge to the metal to come and get her. She flicked her rifle to automatic and fired off a sustained burst into the air.

The endos immediately snapped their heads towards her in unison. The nearest unit glared at her with its gleaming, grinning skull and soulless, malevolent red glowing eyes that locked with hers. Time slowed down to a standstill as human and machine faced off against one another and Savannah found herself mesmerised, unable to tear her eyes away from its eyes; all she could do was stare back.

"Run!"

Cameron's voice snapped her back to reality and she bolted for the main entrance as fast as she could, weaving and jack-knifing to dodge the plasma shots that whipped above her head, so close she could feel the intense heat emanating from them. Her heart went berserk inside her chest as adrenaline coursed through her veins and pushed her through the exhaustion of the last forty-eight hours, renewing her strength.

She dived through the hole, just big enough to accommodate her slender form, and rolled on the ground beyond the entrance. She got back to her feet and ran to a pile of steel girders, office desks, and collapsed ceiling, ducking down behind it and finding herself next to John. "Nice work," he said as Savannah pulled out her magazine and slotted in a fresh one. The old one had been half full but she didn't want to run out of ammo at a crucial moment; if there was a lull in the fighting – and she wasn't expecting one – she'd worry about redistributing her ammunition, and not until then.

"They took the bait," she told him.

"Don't fire until I do," he replied. He made out the form of an endo approaching the hole and watched as it got closer. A metal fist smashed through the concrete and tore a large chunk of it away, widening the gap. It ploughed its foot through more as hard as it could and shattered the concrete, creating a man-sized hole through which it stepped and entered the building.

Cameron emerged from its side and tore the plasma rifle from its grip, then kicked it down onto its backside and stepped away.

"NOW!" John shouted as he pulled the trigger. Immediately Savannah's fire joined his as they poured rapid series of single shots at the machine. 7.62s smacked into the machine and caused it to twitch with each impact as Cameron turned the plasma rifle on it and shot three times, aiming for the chip port and blowing it apart. The machine dropped to the ground but already more approached the entrance: the plan was working. "Cameron, get back," he told her. She complied and moved beside him and Savannah.

"Feel better?" he asked Cameron. She'd been adamant she needed either another plasma rifle or a full magazine, and now she'd got it. That had been her insistence and he had to admit that with it their chances of actually making it through this went up a notch or two.

"Yes," Cameron replied as she held a plasma rifle in each hand. She couldn't tell exactly but she estimated she had at least forty-five

shots in the new one. "Fall back," she told Savannah. The redhead nodded and reluctantly left them to retreat to another position further back. She moved to the side of the main lobby, along with Myers, to cut off the machines if they tried to flank them.

"You ready?" John called back to the smashed security desk behind him, looking like half a hexagon in shape. Support beams that had held up the floor above had snapped and collapsed down on it, crushing the middle, but the sides of the desk still remained.

"Ready," Derek nodded. He crouched behind the desk with Cooper at his side. *As I'll ever be.* He wasn't afraid to admit he was scared; he wasn't shaking or anything but deep down he was terrified; they were inviting the machines to come in and try to slaughter them. Thirty endos against nine of them – eight, he corrected himself; the liquid metal bitch wasn't even bothering to help them; it just pottered around downstairs with its damn gadgets.

"Don't fire until we fall back," John instructed Derek. He didn't want the machines to know how many of them there were, and everything depended on proper firing and manoeuvring to keep the machines bottled up top as long as possible.

Another endo reached the entrance and started to step through; behind it were more machines waiting to follow after it. "Try and bottleneck them here," John said quietly to Cameron. If they could force them to keep going one at a time they might last a little bit longer.

"Twenty-three minutes," Cameron told him. If it reached one minute and they were still fighting she determined she'd drag John down the stairs as fast as she could and throw him into the TDE.

John flicked his rifle to automatic as the first machine entered and stepped over the downed unit. *"Firing!"* John loosed several bursts at the machine and rattled its head like a pinball as the endo raised its own rifle and fired. Cameron fired a split second before it and her shot struck its arm and forced the incoming plasma bolt high,

missing John by inches. She fired three more times and hit it in the face, smashing the armoured skull to pieces and revealing the delicate solid circuitry beneath. The machine still stood, however, and raised its weapon even though it had no eyes to see. John had already rolled to his right and fired another burst into its exposed inner workings, shattering its cybernetic brain and felling it.

More units outside paused in their advance, instead of approaching they held their ground, and seconds later they turned and started to march away.

"What's going on?" Derek asked from the desk behind them. They couldn't have just won the first round, could they?

"Get down!" Cameron shouted at all of them, forcing John down to the ground and shielding his body with hers as the entrance exploded in brilliant white flashes, vaporising the wall it struck and flinging fragments all over, erupting a cloud of smoke and red hot, melting segments of wall.

"What the fuck was that?" Cooper shouted.

Cameron didn't need to see it to know the answer; she'd already said it before. "HK: it made a bigger entrance."

John, Derek and Cooper all saw that Cameron was right; the HK's shots had blown the entrance wide open and he could see the machines all stood at a safe distance. Now they started to advance again towards them. "Let 'em just get inside," he said to Derek and Cooper as well as Cameron, as he switched his battle rifle for the AA12.

The machines moved forward and fired their own weapons as they inexorably advanced, sending a tidal wave of plasma shooting through the lobby and obliterating everything they hit. Worse, John saw, it was keeping their heads down and stopping them from slowing it. "Grenades," he called out to them.

Derek and Cooper both pulled the pins on their frags – courtesy of Savannah – and flung them in a high arc over the desk, sending the two spheres soaring towards the tin cans. Both exploded at once and the force threw back the machines nearest the entrance.

"NOW!" John roared as he pushed himself upright and unleashed a tremendous volley of explosive FRAG-12s at the endos still standing. Derek and Cooper joined in the fray and desperately kept firing burst after burst of 5.56 and 7.62 at the machines, peppering them and causing sparks when the rounds struck, but failing to penetrate. Cameron's plasma rifle, however, succeeded. She held out both weapons and fired at the same time, sending a stream of blue-white bolts into more machines and smashing the armoured chassis of one endo to pieces. John fired a dozen FRAG-12s at another endo and the armour piercing explosive shells chewed through its armour and punched through to the power cell. The machine raised its rifle even as the shells smashed into its power source, and pulled the trigger.

A single plasma bolt flew out and struck Cooper square in the face, sending him flying backwards to the ground. "Man down!" Derek screamed out and instinctively ducked back down and turned to check on him. There was a smoking hole where Cooper's face used to be and the rest of his head was little more than a blackened gourd with singed hair sticking out.

Despite their devastating barrage more machines had gotten through and started to spread out in the lobby. They unleashed their own waves of fire that forced the defenders to keep down as the plasma fire cut down everything it touched.

"Fall back!" Cameron told John and Derek as another incoming volley of plasma flew inches over their heads, so much it was like a blanket of glowing superheated gas above them. Not even a fly would have managed to escape that amount of fire. John nodded at her and quickly crawled on all fours back from his position, past the security desk where Derek was also retreating, and behind the large corner section of concrete where John had told them his plan only a few minutes ago.

They passed Allison and Torrance, crouched behind another pile of rubble. "That didn't go well," Torrance commented.

"We took down maybe three or four endos," John blurted out as he got up to his feet and crouched behind them. "And we knew we wouldn't hold the entrance forever."

"Where's Cooper?" Allison asked Derek. He simply shook his head in dismay.

More firing erupted from the side of the lobby and John saw Savannah and Myers hammering away at the machines from another angle. "Fire in the hole!" Savannah shouted out as she launched four grenades from the M32 and quickly ducked back down behind cover as a plasma bolt sizzled and struck the wall behind where her head had just been. A split second later explosions rocked the entire lobby and more ceiling came crumbling down in an artificial avalanche, raining debris onto everything. She and Myers sprinted towards the back of the room and the adjoining corridor that led downstairs. The plasma fire ceased and the entire scene turned silent save for the creaking of the protesting structure around them.

"Think that bought us a minute or so," she said to John as she ran past his position.

"We've got another problem," Allison said as she watched a trio of endos walking through the smoke and the dust. She fired her M4 at them as she realised what they were doing. "They're going for the elevator shaft!" she called out, increasing her fire and wishing she had more than a crappy M4 on her.

"We have to move," Cameron told John once more. She turned to Allison and Derek. "Keep them away from the elevator," she ordered them, receiving a nod from them each in reply: their distaste for her all but forgotten in the chaos of battle. They knew if the tin cans breached the elevator shaft they wouldn't last another minute. Cameron grabbed John's hand and tore down the stairs, dragging him down with her as he tried to resist and stay up top.

"We can't leave them," John snapped at her as they got halfway down the staircase. He tried to break free from her grasp but she was too strong; he couldn't do it without dislocating his whole arm at the shoulder.

"I won't risk it," Cameron said adamantly. She locked eyes with him and stroked her thumb along the back of his hand. "I won't lose you," she added, her voice turning a tone softer. She heard a scream upstairs and knew someone else had been hit. She wasn't going to risk John being the next one. Once they were down to the basement she led him into the TDE room, where Weaver was still making minute alterations and working away on the laptop.

"What the fuck's wrong with you?" John snapped at her, his anger at being dragged down now turning on Weaver. "They're dying upstairs and you're fucking around down here."

"Come with me," Cameron told Weaver. The T-1001 stared at her for a moment in surprise. Weaver wasn't used to being told what to do; she was always the one giving the orders.

"They're expendable," Weaver said to both of them. "Their past selves will survive if we succeed in stopping Skynet."

Cameron stared at Weaver for a moment. "No one's expendable," she said, mirroring John's previous words to her. Human life was sacred – a value John Henry possessed but now she too was coming to understand. Some – John – were more important than others, but at the same time these people had risked their lives to help him and she wouldn't abandon them unless there was no choice. She was surprised at herself: beforehand she would have left them behind without hesitation. Now she wouldn't.

Cameron led the way out of the room and down the corridor towards the elevator doors. They were closed, which Cameron took as a positive: they hadn't breached it yet. The sound of gunfire drew closer and she heard Savannah shooting from the top of the stairs, and Allison shouting at Derek to fall back.

"Stay down," Cameron pushed John down into a crouch and stood partially in front of him, blocking part of him with her left leg and lower body as she raised her two plasma rifles. John nodded and raised the AA12 to his shoulder and aimed at where the upper chest would be on a tall man. Something thumped behind the doors, followed by second thud and a third. A second later there was a loud *crash* and the stainless steel elevator door buckled. More punches warped the metal until a fist emerged through the middle and pulled both doors open, revealing three endos inside the elevator car.

John and Cameron opened fire with an ear splitting salvo of explosive shells and plasma rounds that enfiladed the machines before they could fire a single accurate shot – a few were forced off target by the fire crashing into them and piercing through their armour. The machine John shot didn't go down, however, and Weaver instantly morphed her hands into large hammers and smashed them against its head, knocking it off balance. One of her hands moulded itself into a hook and she curled it around the endo's neck, and pulled with all her might, yanking it clean from the car and throwing into the corridor. She swept the hammer arm out and whacked its plasma rifle from its grasp, then brought it down hard on the machine's head.

The skull cracked beneath the tremendous blow but still held in one piece. It kicked out at Weaver and forced her legs out from beneath her. She stuck her arms out as she fell and her upper half split into two and instantly morphed into legs and feet as they hit the ground. The rest of her body turned silver and moulded; her head absorbing back into her body as her hips and original legs thinned out, redistributed her mass, and finally she returned to her original shape within a second of her losing balance. She stepped on its neck to pin it down as John aimed the shotgun at it and held down the trigger. The high explosive armour piercing shells tore from the weapon like thunder and crashed into its skull, shattering the metal and blasting its head apart.

"These things are really hard to kill," John sighed. Cameron made it seem easy with her plasma rifle but the rest of them were having a real tough time of it. She picked up the downed machines' rifles and handed them to Weaver. "Now you can help," she said.

John smiled slightly at Cameron, realising he'd been wrong about her when she'd dragged him down the stairs: she wasn't leaving them; she'd seen the endos going for the shaft, just like Allison had, and had planned to get reinforcements. He had to admit Weaver would be one hell of a cavalry charge. "Get up there and help them," John barked at her. "If you help we might actually have a chance."

Weaver stared at John and was curious if his future self had been similar. She'd never met the man before and if he'd been anything like this John then she admitted to herself she'd been too hasty in her judgement of him. In this timeline, too: between him and Cameron, they could accomplish something great; more so with her guidance.

"Very well," Weaver said, clearly irritated at being given orders. If she were human she might have sighed or rolled her eyes. She grew a third, chrome arm out of her chest and picked up all three plasma rifles. A fourth appendage sprouted out from her back. It extended up to the first floor, secured itself to a sturdy metal beam, and she reluctantly pulled herself up the shaft to the ground floor.

"Fall back!" Savannah shouted out to Derek and Allison. The pair of them had joined together after Myers had been killed, and now it was just the four of them – Torrance included – trying to hold back God only knew how many more machines.

"They've breached the elevator shaft!" Allison called out as she watched the trio of machines tear the doors open and drop down inside. She heard a brief exchange of fire and the loud, booming reports of John's shotgun, before it fell silent. *That's Connor dead,*

then, she thought. Derek kept firing at an endo approaching as she pulled the pin on her grenade and tossed it forward. The grenade hit the ground and exploded, throwing the endo back into another behind it and enshrouding both machines in an erupting cloud of dust and smoke.

"Move!" Derek shouted to her, knowing that would only buy them a few seconds before the tin cans got back up. "Where the fuck is Connor?" he growled.

"I think he bought it," Allison replied. They darted around the corner and ran back towards the staircase as Savannah and Torrance came forward, the former wielding the RPG on her shoulder.

Torrance turned the corner and started shooting through the thinning smoke at the endos, covering Savannah as she took aim with the RPG, centring the crosshairs dead on its chest. Scores of shots surged forward, so dense and so rapidly it was like a sheet of plasma shooting through the air. Half a dozen bolts struck Torrance and his whole body flash boiled and fell apart. A red cloud burst from him as he gave out a short cry of pain.

One shot struck the rocket launcher, tore it from Savannah's grasp and sent her reeling backwards to the ground. She clutched at her face and screamed out in pain as molten flecks from the RPG struck her face and the sheer heat and light from the bolts so close to her eyes overwhelmed her eyes.

She turned onto her front and blindly scrabbled away on all fours but a metal hand grabbed her by the jacket, slammed her against the floor and lifted her up. In a daze, she blinked rapidly to try and clear her eyes and her vision started to clear. She saw a grinning, gleaming endo skull staring at her with glowing red eyes. It threw her like a rag doll across the lobby and she struck the wall and sank to the floor. She didn't know how nothing seemed broken or how she hadn't been knocked out, but she wouldn't go down without a fight, and loosed off a whole magazine from her HK417 into its face and chest, not even slowing it down.

It approached her, raised its weapon, and she braced herself for the shots that would burn through her any second now.

A rapid volley of plasma bolts shot through the air and struck the endo from the side, obliterating the machine's head in a split second and it dropped on top of her. She looked up and saw the liquid metal thing step out of the open elevator doors, brandishing three smoking plasma rifles in its arms.

Weaver turned the rifles on the other machines advancing and unleashed a devastating flurry of fire at their attackers. Savannah watched in wonder for a second as scores of glowing bolts zipped across the lobby and obliterated endo after endo, rendering Skynet's deadliest soldiers into little more than scrap metal without apparent effort. Savannah knew when to get the hell out and she dashed down the stairs, passing Allison and Derek.

"Where's Torrance?" Derek asked, seeing she was alone.

"Dead," she said as she started down the staircase.

"What the fuck's going on up there?" Allison asked her, hearing the constant thrumming of and high pitched whines of plasma fire out in the lobby.

"The liquid metal's kicking the crap out of the other tin cans," she replied.

"Get down here!" John shouted to all of them. "We've got trouble."

"What else is new?" Allison groaned as the three of them darted down the stairs towards the TDE room.

Weaver pulled her triggers again and again, releasing a torrent of fire into the endos, downing a third and then a fourth machine. More

endos entered, however, and spread out as others acted as shields, taking the brunt of her fire whilst the rest manoeuvred away to outflank her. She aimed and fired to the side but one machine bore fired a pair of plasma rifles at her.

Searing, white hot plasma tore through Weaver and she contorted as the superheated gas boiled away a large section of her waist. Another shot hit her midsection and she was blown completely in half. She immediately reformed both halves into two smaller versions of herself and the two Mini-Weavers continued to fire in perfect unison, eliminating another endo each. The ceiling and wall at the front exploded and tore open as HKs outside fired more shots to create a bigger entrance for the attacking machines.

She saw a Centaur rolling by and its cannons turned towards the opening, and her. Massive plasma bolts smashed into the floor around her and boiled more of her away. One of the Mini-Weavers lost molecular cohesion and one whole side of her sagged down in a gooey mess.

For the first time in her existence she experienced fear as more and more shots struck her and the heat from the weapons vaporised parts of her mass on impact and ruined the surrounding polyalloy, damaging it to the extent she couldn't reform herself. Another shot engulfed one of her two forms completely and even though they weren't connected the other half felt the loss as much as if a human were to suddenly lose a leg.

She turned round and tried to retreat to the elevator shaft but a pair of endos targeted her and loosed a torrent of plasma shots on her, equalling the salvos she'd dished out to them. Each hit damaged her more and she collapsed under her own weight. She dropped to the ground and still the machines continued firing, pumping shot after shot into her until she lost all cohesion collapsed into a semisolid, gooey, twitching mass.

Weaver knew she wasn't going to make it back to the TDE: she'd been too badly damaged and she couldn't repair herself. She

consisted of several billion minute, microscopic machines that worked in unison and whose attachment could be altered to allow her to change shape. More than half of those nano-cells had been destroyed by plasma fire and cohesion and communication between the remaining ones was severely compromised. She wouldn't make it back but John and Cameron still could return to the past and effectively fight Skynet, and she knew their best chance would be for her to stall the machines' progress as much as she could.

One arm still remained relatively intact and she pointed the plasma rifle it carried upwards, into the elevator shaft and pointing up to the top. She pressed the trigger down and fired a flurry of shots into the walls of the shaft, sending them collapsing down and caving in, filling the space with massive chunks of concrete and steel girders, effectively sealing it off. Another shot struck and boiled away the arm and left Weaver, still aware of everything going on around her, able to do nothing more than twitch and bubble impotently.

"Time?" John asked Cameron yet again, wishing the damn TDE would hurry up. He'd heard the intense barrage of fire upstairs and wondered if even Weaver could have survived that.

"Eight minutes," Cameron said. They were close but the machines would come through before then. She could tell from John's expression he was thinking the same thing.

"So what do we do?" Allison asked, the fear clearly growing on her face. She wasn't the only one; John looked around and saw the same tension etched into everyone but Cameron, though he was sure she felt some apprehension too.

"Wait in here or take the fight to them," Derek answered. Neither one sounded like a hopeful prospect to him.

"What's everyone got left?" John asked them. They all fished through pockets and pouches, checking the last of their ammunition.

"One forty-mil, twenty rounds for the rifle, and two grenades," Savannah said dejectedly. She still had both her pistols but they were basically peashooters against metal.

"Two full mags," Derek reported with about as much optimism as Savannah. Allison had a single full magazine plus half of one.

"Two full magazines for the battle rifle," John said. He pulled out the AA-12's drum magazine and checked it too. "Five shells for this."

Cameron tossed one of her plasma rifles to Derek. He caught it awkwardly and slung it over his back. "It only has six shots," she told him. Her remaining rifle had seventeen rounds left.

"Better than nothing," he shrugged. Six rounds would be enough to take out an endo or two if he shot well enough.

"Seven minutes," Cameron told them. She heard an explosion out to the far right and instantly knew what it was. "They're coming in through the sewer," she said.

"For fuck's sake," Derek hissed savagely.

Savannah led the way out of the room and out to the right, away from the staircase and down the opposite corridor. She could see through the hole in the wall, leading into the sewer – where they'd entered from – another explosion that rocked through the tunnel. "They're blasting their way in," she said.

"Movement at the stairs," Cameron reported, hearing the endos starting to descend the staircase. The machines were attacking from two flanks at once.

"Hold them off at the sewer," John told the three of them. "We'll take the stairs." John and Cameron moved to the left to cover the

staircase and waited for the machines to appear.

Savannah crouched behind the hole in the wall and watched as a third shot penetrated the ground above and sent debris raining down. One endo dropped through the hole they'd made, followed by another. *"Contact!"* She darted through the hole and took up position crouching in a side tunnel. Derek and Allison followed through and set up on the opposite side of the tunnel, in a small parting a few metres ahead of Savannah.

Derek opened fire first with HK417, the rounds barked out of the barrel, smacked into the lead endo with audible *clangs* and even dented the armour minutely in some places, but the machine didn't halt its advance even as Allison joined in the fray.

"Fire in the hole!" Savannah shouted as she tossed a hand grenade towards the machines, pulling the pin on her second and throwing it before the first had even gone off. Two explosions rocked the tunnel and threw the machines backwards, and she brought the M32 to bear as the smoke started to clear, targeted a third machine and fired. The round smashed into its chest and launched it backwards onto the ground with an eruption of smoke and sparks. The machine quickly got back up to its feet; its armoured breastplate and shoulder a charred, tangled mess. It tried to raise its plasma rifle but it appeared unable to move its gun arm.

Savannah dropped the grenade launcher and brought up the rifle. She started to take aim once more but the ceiling creaked and groaned loudly in protest above her. *"Fuck!"* She turned round and dived back through the hole, hitting the floor of the corridor with a grunt as she tucked her head into her chest and rolled with the impact, straight back up to her feet. She turned back to the hole and reached out. "Come on," she urged Derek and Allison.

The two of them backed towards it as Savannah fired through the hole, trying to keep the machines occupied as Derek covered Allison's retreat to the wall. The groaning increased and soot and dust fell down onto Savannah. She looked up in time to see the

ceiling giving way and instinctively dived backwards away from the hole as the whole thing caved in and collapsed, sealing the hole and trapping Derek and Allison outside in the sewer.

She looked down her body and saw a thick, heavy slab of concrete on the ground hanging an inch above her shins. She stared at it, realising if it had been that one inch lower it would have broken her legs or pinned her to the ground. She got up to her feet and tried to pull away chunks of the ceiling and floor above. "Are you okay?" she shouted out. No reply. She could still hear firing behind the collapsed section and heard shouting on the other side, but she couldn't make it out. Seconds later both the shouts and the gunfire ceased. *Shit.*

Cameron fired twice at an endo as it descended the staircase; the first shot tore through its eye, vaporised the lens and cracked the armour around the cheek, eyebrow and the temple. The second shot struck the exact same place and shattered half its face, revealing the delicate circuitry beneath. It swayed on its feet and stared at Cameron with its one remaining eye until a single shot from John blasted through the exposed neural circuits and finished it off.

Before it hit the ground a second endo rounded the corner of the staircase and raised its weapon at Cameron. She remained routed to the spot and tried to bear her own rifle on it in time.

"Get down!" John tackled her to the ground as a shot flew over their heads, wrapped his arms around her and rolled her out of its line of sight. Cameron looked up at him in confusion. He'd saved her, risked his life for her when he didn't have to – shouldn't have done.

"I might have survived one plasma shot," she told him.

"And how would you get back?" John replied. "Your body didn't come through last time because of the damage; even if it didn't fuck you up you'd be stuck here." The bullet wound had just about closed up and

formed a scab but any more damage would trap her here in the future.

"As long as you survive," she said. John shook his head at her but the endo jumped down the stairs and grabbed Cameron, deeming her the greater threat. It slammed her face against the wall and threw her into the corner. John raised his weapon but the machine threw a fist back and caught him in the face, sending him reeling to the ground with starbursts exploding all around him. He shook it off and realised he'd somehow managed to keep his weapons in his hands as he went down. It ignored him and advanced on Cameron as she started to get back up, but her own weapon had been knocked from her grasp and she was defenceless. A red mist descended over John at the sight of the machine a second away from killing her.

"Hey!" he shouted at the machine as it stepped towards Cameron and aimed its plasma rifle. It turned towards John as he snapped up the AA12 and fired his last rounds; the armour piercing shells ate into the tough armour and gouged deep holes, cracking the breastplate and forcing it a step backwards. The second the gun clicked empty John dropped it and raised his rifle.

He launched himself at the metal as it took a step back, caught it off balance and the pair of them toppled down to the ground. John roared out in pure, animal rage – baring his teeth and sending flecks of spittle flying into the machine's face - and thrust the rifle at its head, forcing the barrel into its open mouth. He held the trigger down on full auto and the gun roared and shook violently in his hand as rounds hammered into the weaker plating in the roof of its mouth. Its jaw dropped and hung limply before it was severed completely by the burst, clattering to the ground.

It took only two seconds for John's magazine to empty and he immediately pulled the gun up and smashed it with everything he had into what was left of the machine's face, roaring out in blind rage as he did so.

The endo viciously backhanded the side of John's head and sent him sprawling to the ground. He lay there, stunned, as it got up to its feet and seemed to glare at him – the skeletal head even more creepy without a bottom jaw. Cameron leapt up to her feet and lunged at the machine before it could take a single step towards John. Desperate to keep it away from him she slammed its head as hard as she could repeatedly into the wall, leaving a large dent that cracked outwards from the impact. She wrapped her arms around its head and twisted to the side as hard as she could. The endo's neck snapped with a loud *crack* and the sound of tearing metal as neural circuitry running up its spinal column was severed. Its red eyes faded and dulled to black and she dropped its inert, deactivated body, discarding it as if were unwanted trash.

She stepped over it and helped John up, grabbed the two plasma rifles on the floor – becoming adept at scavenging weapons from downed machines, much like the resistance had. "Two minutes," she said to him. "We need to go, now." She handed one of the weapons to John and they fell back, firing and manoeuvring as they moved. Cameron fired several shots, covering John as he moved; then he lay prone and fired a dozen rounds as she fell back behind him.

"Savannah! Derek! Allison?" he called out as they rounded the corner and broke into a run towards the TDE room. They entered and found it empty apart from Cassie, sat down with her head on the floor, looking pathetically up at John and Cameron, whining slightly. He didn't recall when the dog had become accustomed to Cameron, just noticing she didn't try to bark or attack her on sight.

"Get in the crater," Cameron instructed John, pointing to the perfect circular indentation in the ground in the middle of the room. Sparks were already flying across the room and electricity crackled loudly. Cameron pushed John into the crater as blue lightning started to dance around the middle of the room in a circular fashion, as it running over the outside of an invisible sphere. It rapidly became more frequent and a sphere started to form around him, filling up the indentation in the ground and dominating the centre of the room.

Cameron looked at the laptop's screen and the readout displayed *99%* on the buffer charge.

"Where are the others?" John called out, shouting to be heard above the din of crackling electricity that grew louder by the moment.

"I'm here," Savannah said as she entered the room. "Ceiling collapsed and cut off Derek and Allison: they're trapped in the sewer.

John stepped outside the forming bubble, feeling his skin tingle uncomfortably as he passed through the charged electrons. "Then we go and get them back," he said, steel in his voice. So many had died because of him, he wasn't about to let them down too.

"There's no time," Cameron insisted. Just over one minute remaining. She looked at John and saw him fighting himself, in pain and filled with guilt. She knew he wanted to save everyone – even people who weren't his friends - and that it hurt him badly when he couldn't. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely to him. She heard machines close by outside and knew they'd reach the entrance in seconds.

John saw Cassie still sat miserably on the floor, waiting for Allison, not knowing she wouldn't be coming. "Cassie, get in," he called to her. The Alsatian just stared at John for a moment and looked away, giving out a slight whimper. *"Come on."*

Cameron snatched the plasma rifle from Savannah's grip and shoved the redhead into the sphere with John. She could hear endos approaching, only seconds away, and fighting them in the open corridor was useless. Instead she pointed the weapons up at the ceiling above the doorway and unleashed the last of her plasma shots into it, penetrating through until it caved in. Several tons of steel, concrete, and plaster collapsed from above into the corridor and sealed the entrance. She dropped the spent weapons to the ground, satisfied it would hold the endos outside for long enough.

The sphere was now fully formed and semi-transparent as she stepped inside with John and Savannah. Cassie lay still and whined,

watching them through the haze of supercharged electrons. "Come on," Savannah tried to get her attention. She patted her knees, clapped her hands, whistled, and beckoned, but the dog wouldn't budge.

"Ten seconds," Cameron said to them both as they crouched down and huddled together closely. Not enough time to drag the dog inside. The crackling lightning and sparks had turned into a full blown roar, and it was impossible for them to hear anything going on around them. Blue lightning surged and spun all around them and bright white light emanated from the sphere, growing more intense by the second and forcing John and Savannah to screw their eyes shut. The noise and light show grew into a deafening, ear splitting and blinding crescendo all around them.

Finally the sphere flashed with the intensity of a miniature star, and a second later it was gone. The room was empty save for Cassie as she let out another low, sad whine.

"Come on!" Derek shouted to Allison as the pair of them tore their way up through a smaller section of the sewer. They'd fled the main tunnel as soon as the entrance to the basement had caved in. Derek knew another way around into the basement, though. They'd crawled through a small section of sewer pipe, only large enough for them to shimmy through in single file, pushing their weapons ahead of them using their faces, and had only just left it to emerge in a larger section.

Derek stopped running and slowed down to a halt. "It's just through here," he tapped his knuckles against the wall.

"Behind the wall?" Allison cast him a doubtful look. She leaned against it and tried to listen in. They'd heard a hell of a lot of noise a few moments ago that sounded like a thunderstorm underground, but now there was nothing.

Derek nodded and raised his rifle up to his shoulder, pointing it at the wall. In such a confined space this was gonna be dangerous, he thought. "Close your eyes and cover your ears," he barked at Allison. She did as he said, holding her hands over her ears and keeping her mouth wide open and eyes screwed tightly shut. Derek flicked his rifle to full auto and pressed the trigger, holding it down as the weapon roared loudly and recoiled mercilessly against his shoulder.

The rounds tore through the wall and he swept the weapon left to right, hosing it down with fire and shattering concrete, throwing hundreds of little pieces back at them until the weapon clicked empty. He dropped the rifle; it was useless now – that was his last magazine. He grabbed Allison's M4 and fired a number of bursts, then smashed the butt against the weakened, pockmarked wall until chunks of it broke away and there was a hole large enough. He squeezed through and held out his hand to help Allison follow.

They emerged into a bare room. There was no John, no Savannah, and no tin can. Their clothes had been dumped on the ground in three piles, even their boots were stood in place, as if they'd just vanished into thin air all of a sudden.

"Cassie!" Allison cried happily as the dog jumped up at her and smothered her in licks. She hugged Cassie tight and fussed over her as Derek checked out the TDE. He looked down at the laptop and read the screen. *Time displacement successful; estimated time until next displacement: 24 hours, 58 minutes.*

"Fuck!" Derek kicked viciously at the laptop and smashed the screen. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"They're gone," Allison said sadly, stroking Cassie between her ears and scratching her with her other hand. Cassie nuzzled her face affectionately and snuggled up to Allison, revelling at her attention and knowing nothing of the dire state they were in. Behind the collapsed entrance that led from the TDE room to the corridor they could hear machines picking, punching and heaving chunks of concrete and metal away. They were trying to break in.

"Bastards left us behind!" he growled.

For the first time ever Allison found herself sympathising with John. "They didn't have any choice," she said reasonably. "The liquid metal one said it would go off as soon as it was ready: if they didn't go then nobody would have," she sighed. They probably would have done the same thing in his shoes.

"What're we gonna do?" he wondered out loud. Obviously they'd never last another day down here: the tin cans would break through in minutes. "We can get out the way we came in," he said to Allison. "We know these sewers; we can find a way up top, get out, and head south like we should have done all along." He realised that would have been their best chance; teaming up with Connor had been the worst thing ever to happen to them. Mac, Michelle, Marlin, Torrance, Myers, Cooper, Dyer, *Kyle.* Not to mention Briggs, Mason and everyone who'd died in the Triple-Eight attack. John Connor had brought them nothing but death.

"We could just... let it go," Allison said resignedly. She'd had enough now; enough of running and hiding, of losing her friends, of losing *Kyle.* "Even if we made it out, we've got nothing. Skynet's won," she said, fighting back tears that started to form in her eyes. How much longer would the pair of them last, scavenging, worse off than they'd ever been; alone and miserable, struggling just to survive another day, and for what? Would it really be worth it? What would they have to live for now?

Derek caught on to what she was saying. It went against every fibre of his being; his instinct was always towards survival. He went over to the exposed electromagnet, hearing the machines removing more and more debris blocking their path as he did so. He took the remote detonator from beside the Semtex block and held it up, running his finger over the single switch.

Allison got up and went towards him, Cassie following behind her as she joined Derek in the corner, and together they sat down with Cassie between them, their backs against the hot electromagnet,

acting almost like a radiator as they leaned against it. She relished the heat emanating from it for a moment; she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this warm. Then, sadly, she did: in Kyle's arms the night before they'd all set out; the happiest she'd ever been in her life had been when they'd been tangled together inside his sleeping bag and sharing their body heat, tired, sweaty, but content. She clung on to those memories of Kyle as hard as she could.

"You want to do it, or should I?" Derek asked, holding out the remote for her.

"You do it," she said. She looked at the perfectly circular indentation in the ground, deep in thought for a long moment. "You think they'll manage it; stop Skynet?" she asked as Derek wrapped an arm around her.

"I hope so," Derek said. "Good luck to them," he crossed his fingers for John Savannah, and even the tin can. *"Don't let it happen again,"* he said to an absent John.

A chunk of concrete exploded outwards into pieces and a metal fist broke through the rubble barrier. It pulled backwards and ripped a larger chunk out. More fists hammered and tore at the pile, quickly decimating it until it was large enough for the first endo to step through. A second followed it and then a third. They marched into the room and spread out, the lead endo looked at Derek and Allison and then at the electromagnet behind them. Its mission was to find what had caused the power drain through the sector and eliminate any resistance they encountered. These humans weren't resisting so it didn't shoot. It stepped closer and stood tall over them, casting a looming shadow over the two humans.

"What is this device?" it asked them with a tinny, metallic and slightly guttural voice, like a cross between a vocal synthesiser and a 60-a-day chain smoker whose vocal chords had rotted almost completely away.

Derek couldn't help but grin; he'd never, ever heard an endo speak before. "Fucking stupid voice," he chuckled. He pulled Allison closer and she leaned into him, wrapping her arms tighter around Cassie and sobbing fearfully. She nodded her head against Derek's shoulder and he flicked open the safety switch on the remote. *Good luck, Connor,* they both thought in unison as Derek pressed down on the switch.

In less than one hundredth of a second the signal flowed to the detonator attached to the Semtex and the timer counted down. The endo snatched the remote from Derek's grasp but it was too late. Derek grinned up at the machine and flashed his middle finger as he hugged Allison tighter. Seconds later the Semtex exploded, blasting apart the electromagnet which itself erupted in a brilliant orange and black fireball that blossomed outwards and consumed Allison, Derek, Cassie and the endo.

The explosion overloaded the three remaining electromagnets and caused catastrophic failures through the system, feeding the energy back into them and the superconductors. The TDE exploded in second, massive fireball that spread outwards and tore through the basement and the ground floor, annihilating everything caught in its radius. The blast obliterated the building's foundations from under it and the remains of the Zeiracorp tower collapsed completely, causing an unstoppable avalanche from which nothing escaped. With their last breaths, Derek Reese and Allison Young had wiped out Skynet's assault force and forever denied the AI the secrets of the TDE.

Chapter 22

The Pacific Ocean lapped gently against the golden, sandy shore with the constant sound of waves rolling and water spraying from their impact. Halfway down the beach were several dozen people milling around a bonfire, some dancing to loud music supplied by the CD player of a car parked a few yards away, others sat talking and flirting; all were drinking. Bottles littered the sand and glasses clinked constantly together before people took long swigs of beer or poured spirits into plastic cups and mixed with soft drinks or downed neat, in some cases. Beer, vodka, whiskey, and even weed were shared around copiously as the partygoers determined to keep the good times rolling until the sun came up.

Suddenly the wind picked up out of nowhere and kicked up sand into the party, ruining drinks, sticking to sweaty bodies, and forcing people to shield their eyes.

"What the hell's this?" a tall blonde guy muttered irritably as sand blew into his vodka and coke. He dropped it in disgust, drunk but not enough that he'd carry on drinking with a load of crap in it.

"I don't know," a slim brunette girl at his side, replied. His arm was snaked over her shoulders and she nursed a bottle of beer. She put her hand over the top to keep her drink intact but the sand blew through her long, dark brown hair. She ran her free hand through it to try and get the sand out but it was no good; hundreds of grains lodged themselves into her hair and all she could do was forget it and wipe down her low cut shirt. Sand got into her cleavage and irritated her even more.

"Let me get that," the guy grinned, reaching out to brush the offending sand away.

"Uh, uh," she shook her head and pushed his hands away, a coy smile on her face. "Not so fast."

Thunder seemed to strike out of nowhere, even though the night sky was completely clear, tearing their attention away from the sand and each other. Neon blue-white lightning crackled and tore through the air at ground level a few hundred feet away, causing all the partygoers to stop and stare.

"What the hell?" the girl stared, mesmerised, as a glowing white sphere appeared from nowhere and evaporated a second later, leaving three people crouched down, huddled together on the sand and their bodies curled up. The miniature sandstorm rapidly died down and left the beach as calm as before. A number of people went back to drinking and dancing as if nothing had happened.

"Let's check it out," the guy told his girlfriend. He dragged her by the hand and led her towards the three people. A few other intrigued souls followed after them and walked towards the trio.

John shivered violently and tried to stop his teeth from chattering; he was frozen stiff and instinctively wrapped his arms around his chest in a vain attempt to keep himself warm. He lifted his head up and saw Savannah doing the same as she too trembled from the cold. Only Cameron was unaffected.

John looked around, hoping to see another bubble appear on the beach. He saw nothing, just a party going on a couple hundred feet away. "Derek, Allison?"

"They're gone," Cameron said. John gritted his teeth and slowly shook his head. Deep down he'd hoped they'd have somehow managed to get back, despite knowing that it would be impossible for them to hold out for a full day. He'd promised them all he'd take them

back, to the past, and instead he'd gotten every last one of them killed. *Everyone dies for me.* He hated himself with a passion for it.

Savannah wrapped her arms around herself and touched bare skin. *What the hell?* She took a second to notice John and Cameron were also completely nude. "Why are we naked?" she asked.

"Nothing dead comes through," Cameron answered. "Not even clothes."

"Could've told me that before," she shuddered.

John looked forward and unconsciously stared at Savannah, crouching down and completely nude. He wasn't looking at the things that most guys would be staring at unblinkingly – his attention was on the multitude of scars across her body. He'd seen the entry scar on her stomach and the recent bullet wound on her thigh – scabbed over now - but there were also a number of other marks from burns, cuts, gashes, and a multitude of bruises, as there were on his own, he realised. He'd seen similar scars on Derek – *his Derek* – and knew he'd been through more than anyone ever should; he could instantly tell, even if he hadn't known before, that the years she and Ellison had spent waiting for him hadn't been kind. He dreaded to think of some of the horrors she'd been through.

Cameron caught his staring at Savannah and looked at him for a moment, feeling a tinge of jealousy that his attention was on someone else. She stood upright and held out her hand for John. He took it and looked up to her as she pulled him up. He took a moment to glance over her body, taking in the curves, her toned stomach and legs, and he noticed that despite her seeming to not be affected by the cold, her body had definitely reacted: her skin was covered in goose bumps and her pink nipples had hardened considerably – probably to make her appear more human, he thought.

John gave her a slight smile and forced himself to look at up her face before *something else* hardened. Someone in the distance shouted

and drew his attention away from her. A small group was walking over towards them.

"Hey, you," the blonde guy shouted brashly.

"Stop it, Jack," his girlfriend hissed, worried he was about to pick a fight.

"This is a private party," he continued. As he got closer he saw the trio were completely naked.

"It's a beach," Cameron deadpanned. "It's public property."

Jack ignored the comment and stared the two girls up and down. *Fuck me, they're hot,* he thought to himself. Even though the redhead was covered in scars he decided he still would if she offered. That's one lucky guy, he thought to himself as he looked at John. How did such a filthy, scrawny kid like that score a pair of smoking hot girls to himself?

"Why are you naked?" his girlfriend asked, watching them studiously. She wasn't happy that Jack's attention was squarely on the two girls in front of them; if he thought he was getting any tonight he had another thing coming.

"Forget that," a dark haired guy interjected as he took in the sight of all the hotties around him and then looked out at the calm sea to his left. "Why *aren't we?"* The water was only twenty feet or so away.

"Skinny dip!" one of the girls shouted out, pulling off her clothes and throwing them to the ground. She ran towards the water as fast as she could, still holding a bottle of beer in her hand. Another couple of guys and girls nodded to themselves, grinning widely. Shorts and shirts were removed; tops, bras and bikinis pulled off to reveal more flesh than John had ever seen before all at once, and finally the blonde guy, Jack, and his girlfriend ran towards the sea, rushing to strip off as they went, racing to be the first in.

The dark haired guy turned towards Cameron, and Savannah. "You guys coming in or what?" he asked.

"We'll be there in a minute," John said.

The guy looked at him, noted the two smoking hot girls he was with and figured he wanted a little private fun first. *I don't blame him.* He forgot them and made his way down to the water to join in the fun with the others. He caught up to a naked girl running to the sea and she pretended to shriek in horror as they reached the water and he picked her up, ran in until it was waist deep, and threw her into the sea with a splash.

"That was easy," Savannah shrugged. She'd expected to have to beat the crap out of them. They waited a few moments until the partygoers were all in the water, then they all turned to the piles of clothes left behind and started to help themselves.

Within a moment they were all completely dressed. John wore a pair of combat style shorts, sneakers and a polo shirt – all of which looked like designer gear to him. Cameron and Savannah both sported short denim skirts, sandals, and blue and red low cut tops, respectively.

John felt something in one of the thigh pockets, fished in and found the guy's wallet. *Smart,* he rolled his eyes; leaving your wallet behind to go skinny dipping. He pulled out one of the credit cards and out with it came a small slip of paper with the four digit PIN code. No wonder Skynet had them by the balls in the future, he thought.

"Let's get out of here before they notice," Savannah said. The trio quickly marched through the sand, away from the larger group still around the fire, and made their way up the beach. They pushed through a narrow footpath between large patches of dry long grass that led up a steep incline and emerged through it onto a small, empty parking lot overlooking the beach. None of them had any idea what time of the day it was; simply that it was night.

Cameron stared up at the clear sky and saw all the stars twinkling up in the heavens. She used their exact positions in the sky to calculate the date. It took a few seconds for her to process and calculate it, when she did she concluded that the TDE jump had been successful and it was September 15th, 2009. "We're in the right time," she said.

Savannah also looked up at the stars, albeit in wonder. "I haven't seen stars in seventeen years," she said, slightly awestruck at the sight of the heavens above her. She looked back down at the scene around her and smiled as she noticed a pair of palm trees at the other end of the parking lot, leaves swaying slightly in the gentle breeze. The only trees she'd seen were the dead ones in the nightmarish forests they'd trekked through toward Serrano Point. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen any living plants.

What she found the strangest was that even in just a t shirt and skirt, she was so warm. The future was always cold, bitterly frozen, and she'd gotten so used to it that she felt like she was in a sauna right now; she'd forgotten, after all this time, just how hot California normally was. She was sweltering and sweat had already started to run down her neck, chest and temples even in the relatively cool night air.

"Where are we?" John asked as he took in the scenery around them. He couldn't see any skyscrapers in the distance, there was no smog in the sky and the road on the far side of the parking lot was relatively clear. *This can't be LA.*

John pulled the stolen wallet out from the pocket of his stolen shorts, opened it and took out the drivers' licence inside. It was a California licence, causing him to sigh in relief. At least we're in the right state, he thought. He noted it belonged to a Bradley James Wallace, and remembered that name in case he had to use the card and sign for anything.

They crossed the empty parking lot and started to walk on the pavement alongside the main road running parallel to the beach, looking for any signs as to where they were. Restaurants and bars

lined the other side of the road, all closed and empty, their lights turned off and the insides dark. An SUV drove by them and rolled on by, turning at the next right and disappearing out of sight.

"We need to steal a car," John said as he watched it go.

"We don't know where we are," Cameron disagreed. "You're exhausted, you need to rest."

"We can rest later," John shook his head. "We need to get back to my mom before she's killed."

Cameron turned to him and stopped him from walking any further. "You haven't slept in two days, you haven't eaten in three. You need to rest or you'll hurt yourself." She said it to both John and Savannah; they'd marched four hundred miles in a week, barely slept and engaged with a large number of machines; she could see the fatigue in both of them and knew that if they continued they'd both make mistakes that could put them in danger. She didn't understand why some humans were so reluctant to admit they had limits: John and Savannah were both among them.

"What date was Sarah killed?" she asked Savannah. She'd only heard the story second hand from John.

"Seventeenth," Savannah said. Ellison had made her memorise the exact date so that either one of them could help John.

"Today's the fifteenth," Cameron said. Or the sixteenth, depending on what time it was. "We have time."

"But we don't know where we are," John argued.

Cameron tapped the wallet in his pocket knowingly. "California," she said with a slight smile. She didn't need to sleep; once they found a car they could reach LA from practically any location in the state in less than a day if she drove. They had time to rest and recover, and

she wasn't going to let John risk hurting himself by pushing too hard when he'd already exceeded normal human levels of endurance.

They continued down parallel to the sea front and found nothing, so they crossed the empty road – another sign they weren't in LA, John thought: even at this time of night they'd have had to wait at a crossing or risk being mown down by traffic.

Across the road they turned into one of the city blocks and made their way down, away from the seafront and moving inland. After only a few minutes of walking they got their first clue as to where they were: a single storey motel surrounded by palm trees and with a large pool visible in the back. The parking lot had only a handful of cars dotted around, and at the front was the motel's sign: *Monterey Surf Inn.*

"What the hell are we doing in Monterey?" John asked. "How'd we get all the way out here?"

"The TDE hadn't been used in nearly twenty years," Savannah shrugged. "There's bound to be a few cobwebs in the works after all that time."

"Probably a good thing," John shrugged. If they'd ended up back in Zeiracorp's basement they'd have had a tough time getting out and through LA unnoticed.

Cameron counted only five cars in the lot, which was good for them; it should be quiet. The light was still on at the reception desk at the front so they made their way towards it. Inside was a lone guy in his thirties, with a slightly receding hairline and wearing a brightly coloured shirt. He was sat at a desk facing away from the open window, propped up on one elbow and reading a paperback novel, looking extremely bored.

"Hey," John said, snapping the guy's attention away from his book. He looked up at John, startled, and stood up. He went towards the window.

"Sorry," he smiled apologetically. "We don't get many people this time of night. Can I help?"

"Yeah," John said. "We need a room for the night."

"You guys on vacation?"

"Something like that," Savannah replied.

The receptionist looked at Savannah and Cameron, and then back at John. The three of them were filthy and looked like they hadn't showered in a long, long time. Still, the two girls were pretty damn hot, and cogs started turning in his head: he knew there were a few beach parties going on in the area; these guys weren't travelling as they had no bags with them... the guy with them was one lucky bastard, he thought as he pieced together exactly why they wanted a room. *These damn kids,* he mentally shrugged, barely able to suppress a grin. He wished he'd been half as wild when he was their age. "I take it you just want the one room?" he asked, reaching for the key to a queen sized room.

"Yeah," John nodded. It would be safer if they all stayed together.

"Lucky bastard," the guy mumbled under his breath. Only Cameron heard him but she didn't react at all. He pulled a key off the hook and handed it to John. "What's the name?" he asked.

"Brad Wallace," John said, recalling the name on the licence.

"Room eleven," the receptionist said. "And that'll be fifty-five dollars for the night, plus a twenty dollar deposit."

John took out the wallet and opened it. Inside there was a hundred dollars in crisp $20 notes but he'd learnt since the jump to 2007 that paying in cash these days made people seem suspicious, and a lot of places – airports, car hire companies, and most hotels – wouldn't even accept it. He pulled out the card, stealing a glance at the PIN note inserted into the card pocket, and slotted it into the machine. He

entered the number and seconds later it cleared. He put it back into his wallet and pocketed it.

"All done, have a good night," he winked, a sly grin on his face.

"Yeah, thanks," John replied. He turned from the reception and stalked towards the rooms. There weren't all that many so it didn't take them long to find their room and John slotted the key into the door and opened it. He held it open for Cameron and Savannah and the pair stepped inside before he followed after them. Inside the air was immediately cooler and John noticed the two queen sized beds dominating the main room. Off to one side was the open door to the bathroom. He could see the shower even though the room was dim and his skin tingled in anticipation at the mere thought of hot water.

He turned the lights on, jumped onto one of the beds and collapsed back onto the clean, soft sheets and springy mattress. He'd been used to sleeping on the rough ground, or not at all lately, and he already felt like he'd died and gone to heaven. He closed his eyes and spread out. "I never want to leave this bed," he said with a smile on his face.

Savannah kicked off her sandals and stepped into the bathroom, having other priorities than a bed. She closed and locked the door and unceremoniously stripped off, dumping her stolen clothes on the floor and pressing the button for the power shower. Their motel room was by no means luxurious, but it was clean and safe, and for Savannah it was practically a palace.

She pulled the curtain back and stepped into the tub, and sighed loudly as the hot water cascaded onto her, soaked into her filthy hair and ran down her skin. She spent ages in the shower and let the hot water sluice away what felt like a lifetime's worth of dirt and grime. She reached for the complimentary shampoo and squeezed a large dollop into her hands before running it into her hair and starting work on the accumulated grease, dirt and tangles. She did it three times before her hair felt anywhere approaching clean and she started on her skin with shower gel and a washcloth until the grime and dirt

came out and left her skin red from scrubbing too hard. She inspected herself as best she could without a mirror in the shower; her skin felt clean, as did her hair, and even the dirt under her fingernails was gone, albeit they were still cracked and broken. *Oh god!* This was sheer bliss!

She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a hot shower. Ellison had set up an impromptu one in the tiny little Mexican village they'd stayed in, before she'd made him tell her about her mom and all the crap that had followed. It had been little more than a bucket he'd stabbed holes in and hung over an old bathtub in a decrepit one-storey house. He'd boil up some water, mix it with cold, and pour it into the bucket. Fresh water had been tight and they'd only been able to shower each once a week, then later once a fortnight.

She whimpered almost silently at the thought of Ellison and she leaned against the tiled wall and started to sob. Suddenly the shower didn't feel so good anymore; she abruptly shut it off, got out and towelled herself down. She got back into the clothes she'd stolen and stepped outside.

"All yours," she said bluntly to John and Cameron as she left the bathroom. "Got the wallet?" she asked. John fished into his pocket, pulled it out and handed it over.

"I'm gonna get some food; anyone want anything?" she asked.

John thought about it for a moment. "Whatever you're getting," he replied. He'd been so busy up until now he hadn't realised he was starving; his body had learnt to run on very little food and he hadn't had time to eat lately, but now they were back and they were safe his stomach started to growl with a vengeance.

"Cameron?" Savannah turned to her.

"I don't need anything," she said simply.

"Would you *like* anything?" Savannah asked. She figured Cameron wouldn't need to eat, but maybe she'd want something anyway.

"Small soda," Cameron said. She saw the inquisitive look on John's face as he lay down on the bed. "I like the bubbles," she explained.

"Got it," Savannah said. She opened the door and promptly exited, leaving John and Cameron alone in the motel room. She made her way across the motel and back to the main road, briefly considering asking at the reception desk for directions to any all night fast food places, but deciding against it. She wasn't in any hurry: she was hungry, sure, but the main reason she'd left was because she needed to be alone.

She quickly marched along the road, leaving the motel behind her, having no clue where she was going and not really giving a shit either.

After twenty minutes of walking aimlessly, watching the mental image burned into her retinas of Ellison, dragging Kyle away, and a second later consumed in roiling blue flame – seeing where she was going but at the same time almost on autopilot, she saw an all night gas station on the right side of the road, just ahead of her, and a hundred yards down on the left was a *KFC,* still open even at stupid o'clock at night.

She'd gone out to get food but she ignored the place, marched straight into the gas station and walked up and down the aisles until she found what she was looking for: the liquor section. She needed something strong to try and numb the pain. She couldn't keep a lid down on this like everything else she had. The lid was cracking and any moment now it'd come clean off, and everything would come pouring out of her.

She picked up a fifth of cheap, own label vodka, and started towards the cash register. She had enough money to get that and food for the others, she just needed to find somewhere quiet and drink herself into sweet oblivion for a few hours.

The station was empty so she didn't have to wait in a queue. She handed the bottle over and the tall, pimply teenager manning the cash register glanced at her briefly, decided she was over twenty-one, and scanned the bottle quickly. "You got a pump?" he asked. Savannah shook her head, thinking that was a pretty fucking stupid question seeing as the forecourt was completely empty. "That's twenty-six-fifty," the attendant said.

Savannah pulled out two twenty-dollar notes from her pocket and started to hand them over. She stopped with her hand over the counter and the notes in her hand still. She thought back to when she was a teenager; running away from Ellison and getting trashed every night. The things she'd done just to get herself drunk or stoned enough to forget: she'd lost her virginity to a middle aged Mexican Army major - at only fifteen years old - for a canteen of wood alcohol and a line of coke. She'd never told Ellison the details of her life out on the run but he'd known the gist of it.

He'd spent months of his life tracking her down, forgetting about the mission to live long enough to get John back, focused completely on her. He'd spent months more nursing her back to health, caring for her and just providing her with someone to confide in, someone she could trust completely. She knew what would happen if she carried on down this road: she'd get shitfaced, blitzed out of her skull until the booze ran out, and then she'd be desperate to find something else to take the edge off. In this new world there were plenty of opportunities for her to go down the same slippery slope again. Whose bed would she wake up in tomorrow if she did?

Ellison would never want that, she knew. He'd only ever wanted what was best for her, and this wasn't it. He was also the kindest, most patient, most trustworthy and reliable person she'd ever known. People had counted on him and he'd never once failed them. People counted on *her* now – John and Cameron – and she couldn't let them down, either. *Is it worth it?* She wondered. A night's blissful, drunken numbness and oblivion that would undo everything Ellison had done for her?

She pulled back her arm and stuffed the notes back into her pocket as she turned from the cash register, leaving the vodka on the counter.

"Hey!" the kid behind the desk snapped irritably. "Are you gonna buy this or what?"

"What does it look like?" Savannah shot back as she made her way to the exit. She didn't wait for any kind of reply from the attendant as she pushed the glass door open and stepped outside. She quickly turned away from the gas station and set her sights on the *KFC* on the other side of the road.

Cameron stepped out of the bathroom, fresh and clean after scrubbing at her skin meticulously for twenty minutes, removing every last speck of grime and dirt from her body. Her body had been buried underground for eighteen years; the living tissues sustained by the fuel cell that even in her offline state had provided some power to regenerate and nourish her organic components. There had been very little dirt on her as such, but dust, cobwebs, and years of dead skin had to be scrubbed off her body and out of her hair. She didn't care about it but knew if she remained unkempt it would attract attention.

She walked into the main room in only the underwear she'd taken from the pile of clothes on the beach, and sat down on the bed next to John, now clean and still slightly red from the heat of the shower he'd taken before her.

He could only stare at her like a hawk as she moved from the bathroom and set herself down beside him. He gulped nervously as she brushed against him and he felt the heat radiating off of her skin from the shower. He could feel his heart rampaging inside his chest and the worst was he knew she could sense it too.

"Are you okay?" Cameron asked him, noticing his reaction as she'd sat down beside him.

She turned slightly towards him and caught his gaze as he nodded in reply; she saw his eyes wander briefly down away from her face towards her chest, her hips and her thighs respectively. She recalled their discussion in the hangar that had been cut short by Skynet's attack, and decided that now was the best time to continue it: she wanted answers.

"In the hangar, I asked you why you followed me to the future," Cameron said as she stared at John, scrutinising his face for every possible reaction. "You never told me," she added.

John paused for a moment, completely taken aback by her question. What the hell was he supposed to say to her? He opened his mouth to speak but stammered and nothing came out. He sat there with his mouth half open, trying to decide how to answer. "It doesn't matter," he said defensively, turning his face away from her. *Good one,* he chided himself.

"It matters," Cameron said, deciding to press the issue further. She knew he was emotionally attached to her but she wanted to know to what extent, and why he was attached to a machine. She liked it, but it didn't make sense to her. "You put yourself in danger coming after me. You put the world in danger; we almost didn't survive. I need to know why."

"Cameron, it doesn't..." John trailed off midsentence as he started to really think about it. Why was he doing this to himself? *What am I so afraid of? Why can't I just say it?* He turned his head to look back at her, saw her waiting expectantly for a reply, her eyes wide open and staring at him. He knew what he was afraid of; he just hadn't wanted to admit it, even to himself. It was a huge can of worms he knew he should never, ever open. It could never work, could it?

He thought about Allison and Kyle; they'd only been together for a short while; a single night followed by odd kisses, handholding, and

glances between them. Losing Kyle had probably torn Allison apart but he knew without a doubt that she – just like his mom with the other Kyle – wouldn't have changed what happened between them even if she could have. *Fuck it,* he thought; there was no point in denying himself any happiness because of how things might turn out. Funny, he thought to himself, that it took Allison and Kyle to make him realise that.

"Because I can't do any of this without you," he told her. "I need you..." *Be a fucking man and just say it,* he snapped at himself. "Because *I love you,* Cameron," he blurted out quickly, his face instantly turning a shade of red as he spoke. He took a deep breath before continuing. "I always have." He leaned over quickly towards her and closed his eyes as he pressed his lips to hers.

Cameron's eyes remained open and she hesitated as she processed what he'd just said. He loved her. She'd known he was attached to her, had assumed it was infatuation due to her physical attractiveness, but she considered it and recalled that he hadn't once shown any sign of attraction to Allison. She'd never detected any of the physical signs or the body language he'd displayed around her, when Allison had been close to him.

John opened his eyes when she didn't react and started to pull away, dejected, until Cameron leaned into him and responded in kind, just as she had back in the future. John opened his mouth and deepened the kiss, exploring her tongue with his as he pulled her closer, passion rising as high as his heart rate as he pushed Cameron down onto the bed and leaned over her. He reached up and cupped both her breasts in his hands, gently squeezing the supple flesh beneath the bra cups as he moaned into the kiss.

Cameron knew what he wanted, what he *needed.* He'd said he loved her, and she knew that not responding would severely upset him. Seeing him in distress would equally affect her. She sat up and unhooked her bra, dropping it to the ground before she lay back down on the bed, allowing John to explore her body.

His excitement grew by the second as he took in the sight of her curves, her small, pert breasts and the hardened pink nipples now exposed. He kissed her hard on the lips once more and his hands roamed all over her, barely able to contain himself as ages of pent up emotion was finally released. His heart almost skipped a beat as she kissed him back with a passion and held one of her hands at the back of his head, running her fingers through his hair. He pulled up and watched her for a second. She was completely calm, albeit she was red and flushed, and her mouth was curved upwards in a slight smile. Their lips crashed together again before he pulled away again, this time he slowly kissed his way down her neck, her chest, over creamy mounds, down her belly and beyond, slowly pulling her underwear down her creamy thighs as he went.

When she was fully naked he kissed his way back up her body until he was atop her, looking down at her face and felt her hands snaking their way up to his shorts and slowly pulled them down, boxers and all.

When they were both nude Cameron reached down between them and guided him into her. She was almost certain he hadn't done this before and saw no harm in helping him. John groaned as they connected and Cameron's smile broadened as he pushed into her. He'd never felt anything like this before, in any sense of the word, and he found himself awash in pleasure, almost completely overwhelmed. He let out a low moan in sheer delight, leaned down again and kissed her hard as she wrapped her arms around the small of his back and moved with him, quickly finding a rhythm together as she held his head down close to hers and maintained the kiss, not wanting it to break even for a moment as she and John moved together. She let out a slight moan and continued to smile throughout, finding herself inexplicably happy – not satisfied or pleased, *happy* – as they moved faster and faster against each other .

When it was over John lay on his back beside Cameron, the quilt draped over their naked, sweaty bodies. She lay with her hip and her shoulder pressed against him, and her head on the pillow, inches from his. She felt his pulse rapidly slow down, below normal, into a low, relaxed beat inside his chest.

John looked up at the ceiling, deep in thought about what had just happened. He didn't regret it, not for an instant. Part of him wished he'd done it sooner – accepted and admitted how he really felt for Cameron – but he knew that back then he wouldn't have been ready. Could it work between them, what kind of relationship could they even have? He didn't know, but he wanted to find out. Whatever it was, he wanted her.

Something bugged him, though. Throughout Cameron had smiled and had kissed him unrelentingly until they'd reached their crescendo. She'd sighed slightly but she hadn't reacted much like he'd imagined a girl would. "Did that... *do anything* for you?" he asked nervously, turning to face her and watching for a response, even though he knew very well she could control every last muscle in her face and give nothing away unless she wanted to.

"I'm not human," Cameron answered. She had nerve endings in the same places a human woman had but her chip wasn't designed to process sexual stimulation the way a human brain did. "It was nice," she said.

John frowned sullenly as something horrible came to mind. Had he just used her to get himself off? She probably wouldn't mind but *he* did. The thought of it really bothered him; he wasn't like that. "Did you feel anything at all?"

Cameron propped herself up on one elbow to face him and nodded reassuringly. "I told you before: I have sensation, I feel."

"What did you feel?" he asked, curious as he searched her eyes.

Cameron suddenly found the question to have more meaning than perhaps John intended. Physically, intercourse was meaningless to her: it felt pleasant but she doubted it was anything like a human woman would have experienced, from the little she'd read on the subject. She'd enjoyed it, however. She liked kissing John; both for the tactile sensation as well as the closeness they'd shared. She struggled for a microsecond to find the right description, before settling on *'intimate.'* They'd shared a bond before but now it had solidified further, and she didn't want that to stop. She was happy to have sex with John even though the act by itself did little for her: he derived the physical pleasure whilst she was content with their intimacy and the affection he showed for her. "I felt everything," she said. "But not like you do."

She thought about what else she felt, for John. She'd die without hesitation to protect him, and not only was his physical safety paramount but so was his emotional wellbeing: she wanted him to be happy and she'd do anything to make it happen. She'd learnt a lot and grown because of John. Every second she had resided in John Henry's chip she'd thought about him, worried for him. He was the centre of her world, her reason for existing in the first place, and the reason she still continued to live after the events of the future. Even if they stopped Skynet she never wanted to leave his side. "I love you too," she finally added, craning her head towards him and pressing their lips together softly.

Savannah signalled right a moment before she swung the car into the motel's turning and eased it into the parking lot. She haphazardly parked in one of the bays, not quite between the lines but the place was fairly empty and as she looked around at the other parking jobs she realised hers wasn't the worst, not by a long shot.

She turned off the ignition and pulled the key out, silencing the engine of the Lexus before she opened the door and stepped out. She reached back in and pulled two large, full paper bags out with

her, carrying them in her arms as she nudged the door shut with her foot.

After deciding against getting wasted she'd gone into *KFC* and ordered two large Zinger Tower Meals, plus drinks, sides of corn and beans, salad, and took it to a table. She'd sat alone with her thoughts as she'd quickly and meticulously torn through the entire thing, well aware but not caring as staff at the counter watched this five-foot-five, hundred-and-ten-pound redhead devouring herculean amounts of greasy fried chicken and fries, pausing only to take a drink from one of the two large cups, and polishing the whole thing off in what was probably record time.

When she'd finished she'd left the cardboard packaging and cups at the table and slipped past another table where a man and woman in overalls were quietly eating their own meals – they'd looked like men who'd just come off a nightshift and were having a quick bite to eat before heading home. As she'd passed by them she'd spotted a pair of car keys in the woman's open handbag, hanging off the back of her chair. She'd quickly snatched them and slipped unnoticed into the customer bathroom, washed the greasiness from her hands and around her mouth, and stood in a cubicle, taking deep breathes in through her nose and out her mouth; fighting the urge to throw up all the food she'd just rushed down her neck.

When she'd managed to stop herself from being ill she'd then quietly slipped back outside and into the restaurant proper, where she'd ordered several more meals to take out. When she'd paid and gotten them out she'd left, walked around the back to the parking lot. There'd only been three cars and she pressed the unlock button on the key fob, identified the blinking lights of a shiny black four door Lexus, got inside it and driven off.

She leaned her elbow on the door to their room and put her weight on it, pushing it down until the latch gave and she shouldered it open as quietly as she could, slipped inside and let the door swing closed, clicking as it locked back into place.

Inside the lights were off and it was dark. She shuffled the bags around into one hand, felt around for the light switch on the wall and eventually found it. A low, dim light glowed out from a bulb above the TV, opposite the two beds. Cameron and John lay in one of them, both completely still under the covers and pressed up close together. She saw the peaceful, contented expression on John's face as he slept. Cameron, however, was wide awake of course, and watched Savannah as she entered the room.

"Wow," Savannah said quietly, mildly in shock at the sight of them snuggled up in bed together. It was a warm night and the quilt didn't cover them completely. She saw their naked shoulders above the covers and she could smell the musky scent of sex in the room.

She remembered what she'd said to John before, about them getting a room, but she'd never actually thought he would have. Then again, she thought; she'd seen how close John had been, how attached, throughout their ordeal: how careful he'd been with her inactive body, how he'd leapt to her defence in the plant, and the almost-kiss between them she'd broken up before anyone else had caught them. It wasn't that out of place when she put all the pieces together.

She put the bags of food down on the dresser drawer and sat on the other bed, facing Cameron. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to think about it; it was just so... *weird.*

"Don't wake him," Cameron said softly. John was physically and emotionally exhausted; he needed to rest and she had no intention of disturbing him for at least eight hours.

"I won't," Savannah said in a low voice as she took her shoes off and pulled her legs up onto the bed too. She looked at John, slumbering deeply, not moving an inch apart from the slow rise and fall of his chest. She figured he'd needed something, with all the crap they'd been through lately. He'd gone through hell to get Cameron back. "He loves you, doesn't he," Savannah said, more a statement than a question.

"Yes. And I love him too," Cameron said simply.

"How's that even possible?" How could a machine feel anything at all? It didn't make sense. "I thought Skynet built you guys to be these emotionless killing machines."

"That's the popular theory," Cameron answered. "People don't understand how we work." It was impossible for a machine as intelligent as a terminator to not feel something, however rudimentary or mission oriented it might be. How she could feel something as complex as love, she didn't know. Her best estimate was that it was a combined result of her mission to protect John and the time she'd spent with him, learning things from him, teaching him others, and the level of interaction they'd had. She disregarded it: it didn't matter how she was able to love John. She did. That was all that mattered.

Savannah thought about that; it was weird but it did make sense. She guessed it would be stupid for Cameron to be assigned to protect John but deep down not really care if he lives or dies; the same as how the Cromartie one Ellison had told her stories about must have really *wanted* him dead. "What's it like?" She asked, curious. "Do you feel it like we do?"

Cameron tilted her head ever so slightly, confused. "I don't know; what does it feel like to you?"

"I..." Savannah paused for a moment and frowned. "I don't know," she said. "I've never felt like that about anyone." She realised, sadly, that out of all the people she'd hooked up with when she'd run away, she'd never actually cared about any of them: they'd all been just a means to booze or drugs to help her forget. Otherwise she wouldn't have pissed on any of them if they were on fire. "I guess it's impossible to know for sure," she shrugged.

"I feel it," Cameron said. "It's real for me."

"Just make sure you invite me to the wedding," Savannah smirked dryly. She found it funny that a machine knew more about love than she did. She got up off the bed and stripped off until she was completely naked – she was so used to being cold that even the night air of the California coast was swelteringly hot – neatly folded her clothes and placed them in a tidy pile at the foot of her bed for easy access in an emergency, turned the light off and slipped into the covers of the other bed.

The feel of the soft, clean sheets against her naked skin was indescribable. She sighed out as her body relaxed into the soft, springy mattress and she rested her head on the pillow. This was five-star accommodation for her; she and Ellison had spent most of their time after Judgement Day in Mexico, and had arranged a number of hideouts underground or in the wilderness where they'd stay for a time before moving on. At best they'd had an old couch or just a mattress they'd managed to salvage, but often it was just sleeping bags on the cold, hard ground.

She kept the covers down by her stomach, too warm to fully wrap herself up, no matter how much she enjoyed the feel of the sheets on her skin. She closed her eyes and immediately started to fade away – one of the few advantages of living the life she had in the future was that she'd learnt to fall asleep pretty much anywhere, anytime, and could often drop off within minutes of putting her head down.

"I got you a diet coke and some fries," she yawned to Cameron. She heard Cameron say 'thank you' faintly but within moments her entire world went black as sleep claimed her. Images of Ellison consumed in roiling blue fire played out in her unconscious mind and added to the library of horrific, traumatic experiences that made up the bulk of Savannah Weaver's life. She could always drift off without difficulty but sleep never came easy.

Chapter 23

John opened his eyes as consciousness returned and the world reappeared around him. He frowned for a moment as he tried to work out where he was; his brain was clouded over in a fug of exhaustion still. Fragments of memories swirled confusingly through his head but he couldn't piece them together. It was normally these few moments of the day that John liked best: when, for a few seconds, there was no running, no hiding, and no destiny; just himself and the bed.

He felt Cameron's soft skin against his arm and the memories came flooding back. He turned his head to the side and smiled slightly at the thought of the night before. It still seemed so surreal; a fence had been torn down from between them. He didn't know what exactly they would do from here. He was surprised he didn't feel awkward, didn't leap out of the bed now it was the cold light of day. He'd been through so much to find her; there was no point denying anymore that he loved her. She lay still beside him and returned his smile.

"Hey," he inched closer to her, enjoying the feel of their bodies together. "What time is it?" he wondered.

"Breakfast time," Savannah said from the desk, talking with a mouth full of fries and a drink in her hand. She tossed a KFC bag onto the bed, landing on John's legs, and shovelled another handful of fries into her mouth. She chewed noisily as she pulled the straw to her lips and sucked lukewarm orange soda into her mouth, swilling it with the food before she swallowed.

John sat up in bed and tore open the paper bag, pulled out a cardboard burger box and ripped it open. The smells of the spices and herbs wafted into his nostrils and his stomach rumbled so violently even Savannah could hear it from the other side of the

room. He'd been running on such little food for so long now he'd become used to it, but with it right in front of him he started salivating like a dog as his gut growled, demanding to be satisfied. He pulled out a Zinger Tower burger and took a large bite.

"Mmm!" he mumbled as he chewed on the food, savouring the taste of it. Never had cold, greasy fried chicken tasted so good! "God bless you, Colonel Sanders," he murmured with a mouth full of food as he tore into the burger and demolished it in only a few bites as Cameron watched him and Savannah gorge themselves.

"You'll make yourself sick," she warned.

"It'll be worth it," John grinned, his lips and chin covered in grease and bits of fried spices. He handed a carton of fries to Cameron. "Want any?" he asked.

Cameron took the fries and slowly started to eat them, one at a time and showing much better table manners than either John or Savannah.

"Here's your coke," Savannah got up and handed the small cup to her. "It's probably gone flat, sorry."

Cameron took it and sipped on the straw, the drink had lost much of its effervescence, but she appreciated the gesture. "Thank you," she smiled. She took a few more fries and ate them, then handed the rest of the carton to John. She watched as he messily devoured another burger and shovelled fries into his mouth, not chewing properly and swallowing large chunks of food.

Once he'd finished the second burger he reached for a side of beans and started to rip the lid off, but Cameron gripped his wrist and stopped him. "That's enough," she told him. His stomach would have shrunk in size over the time in the future and gorging himself would do more harm.

"I'll be okay," John said, but she still held fast to his arm and he knew he'd never be able to break her grip. With her free hand, Cameron dropped the sheet to her waist, revealing her small, perfect breasts. All thought of food abandoned John and he dropped the still-sealed pot of baked beans back onto the bed. She slid out from beneath the covers and allowed John full view of her body for a long moment before she reached for the clothes she'd stolen and started to pull them back on, much to John's disappointment.

He took the hint and reluctantly put the remaining food back into the bag. He started to push back the covers before looking at Savannah and remembering he was also naked beneath them. He turned to Cameron, already in her skirt and putting her bra back on. "Can you pass me the clothes?" he asked.

"Not like I haven't seen you naked," Savannah said, slightly amused at John's discomfort.

"That was different," he said as Cameron handed him the clothes from the floor beside the bed. He slipped the shorts on beneath the covers and pulled them up to his waist, then got out of bed once he was covered up. Once he was up on his feet he finished dressing himself and picked up the bag of *KFC,* planning to finish the rest off later. It was greasy, cold crap, but it was the best he'd ever tasted!

"What're those?" he asked as Savannah picked up a set of car keys from the desk.

"What's it look like?" she said as she moved towards the door.

"Where'd you get them from, and where'd you even learn to drive?" John asked, bewildered.

"I stole it, and Ellison taught me," she answered both his questions. Even a few years into the war, she and Ellison had been living in such a remote area in Mexico that the machines hadn't been a bother for some time. She hadn't even seen an HK or a Centaur until she was ten.

They opened the door and left the room; they had no baggage or even any possessions on them, so the only thing they took with them were the paper bags with the remaining takeout inside. Outside the sky was a brilliant, bright blue and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. The sun burned down on them and both Savannah and John immediately noticed the simmering heat beating down on them.

John shielded his eyes from the harsh glare of the sun, having become used to living with little light and constant cold, he knew it would take time to get acclimatised to the present day. He decided he needed to get some sunglasses as soon as he could, and a change of clothes. Cameron swiped the keys from Savannah's hand and started towards the black Lexus, noting the matching symbol on the keys.

"I'm driving," Cameron said as she pressed a button on the key fob and the car's doors all unlocked. Savannah turned and stared at her, bewildered and disappointed; she'd wanted to drive.

"I don't need sleep," Cameron explained. She could see the fatigue still present in both Savannah and John; they needed rest and she could drive constantly without stopping.

"Are we gonna check out?" John asked as he opened the passenger door and slid in beside Cameron as Savannah took the rear seat behind them.

"Why bother?" Savannah shrugged.

"Its better if the clerk doesn't see us twice," Cameron said. "It makes us harder to identify." She and John were still fugitives and they'd also stolen clothes, money, and a car last night; they needed to keep a low profile and avoid all unnecessary contact with other people.

"Fair enough," John shrugged. Cameron turned on the ignition, put the car into drive and started out the parking lot. She turned out onto the main road, heading south. There traffic was very light on the road but Cameron kept their speed at 45mph to avoid attracting attention.

Both John and Savannah stared out at the coast, visible up on their right. The sun shone down onto the deep blue water, and combined with the palm trees dotted around and the clean streets, it looked like pure paradise. If they had a week to wait before getting back to his mom and Ellison, and he wasn't wanted and with no money, he wouldn't have minded resting up here for a few days.

"Do you know where you're going?" Savannah asked several minutes later.

"Highway," Cameron pointed to a sigh up ahead on their right, indicating the coastal highway – Route One – was their next turning. She knew that would take them down to LA: Route One had been frequently used as a supply route for Skynet's forces between Los Angeles and San Francisco. John had deployed units of guerrilla fighters to target convoys at random sections along the long highway, depriving its installations of supplies and slowly depleting their numbers until Resistance forces in the region were able to operate with considerably more freedom. Depriving Skynet of Route One had been a major tactical victory in the West Coast theatre.

Cameron turned onto the highway's on-ramp and sped up to sixty-five. The traffic was heavier but steady along the larger road and she kept a steady pace. As she drove she carefully watched the other cars around them and their occupants, and from the corner of her eye she could see John doing the same.

A light blue BMW on Cameron's right contained the driver and a single passenger: a middle aged Caucasian couple who appeared to be engaged in an argument. She couldn't hear them so she was unsure of what it was about. Inside another car, a Ford pickup ahead of the BMW, were three girls in their early twenties. And in a Prius just behind them, Cameron saw through the rear view mirror, was a lone man in his thirties. She assessed his build and gait: he was of average build – perhaps one hundred and seventy pounds – and height, with dark hair. He was the only occupant of his car and the only person she could see who fit the likely profile of law enforcement. His eyes were forward, on them, and she carefully

scrutinised him, concerned he could be a police officer in an unmarked car. He continued to stare intently at them and she assessed the other cars around them in case she had to try and evade him.

"What is it?" John asked nervously, noticing Cameron's eyes constantly flickering to the mirror. He knew better than to turn around and instead looked up at the mirror, and then out at the wing mirror on the car door, seeing the guy in the car behind.

The driver pulled out a cell phone, dialled, and put it to his ear with one hand. He started chatting and smiling, and let out a laugh at something the other person must have said. Cameron changed lanes and sped up, leaving the car behind. She watched as the driver kept talking on his phone and made no move to follow them. She scanned the view through the mirror for any other cars attempting to accelerate to keep up with them and saw nothing. She stopped watching him, satisfied, and turned to face John.

"Nothing," she smiled reassuringly. "Relax. We'll reach LA in six hours."

The black Mercedes pulled into the drive of Ellison's house and the Sarah turned the engine off, leaving the three occupants of the car in silence and darkness, illuminated only by the streetlights spaced out on either side of the road on the pristine middle-class suburban street.

She pulled her Glock from her pocket and turned around in the driver's seat to face Danny in the back, sat completely still and looking forward blankly. She pointed the weapon at his head and he his eyes widened like saucers, locking on to the gun inches from his face and he instantly fell back into his seat as far as he could go and let out a whimper as he started to tremble in fear. All he could think of was how his dad had been held at gunpoint before, and he'd been

dead within hours; it was his turn now and he was scared out of his mind. *"Please."*

Ellison looked at Danny, trying to hide any emotion on his face whatsoever. Sarah wasn't going to kill him, and even if the thought entered her mind he wouldn't allow it. But they couldn't let Danny know that just yet.

"We're going inside," Sarah told him, speaking slowly so even through the near panic he was going through, he would be able to understand. "If you make any noise or try to run, I'll shoot you."

Danny just nodded glumly and made no other reply as Sarah opened her door and stepped out of the car. She slammed her door shut and then opened Danny's. "Move," she ordered. He stepped outside and stood upright, taking a moment to look around as Ellison got out of the door on his side. There were plenty of houses on either side of the road but it was so late at night that he couldn't see any lights on in any of them. Still, he thought, surely someone would hear if she fired her gun at him; would she risk it? Should he call her bluff?

Cold steel pressed against his neck and he felt Sarah's glare burning down on him without even seeing her eyes. "Don't even think about it," she growled. "This gun's got a suppressed barrel; no one would hear a thing." It was a complete bluff but she was willing to bet that Danny Dyson knew nothing at all about firearms. The fact he froze and nodded sullenly confirmed what she'd thought.

"Inside," Ellison said as he led the way up the small but well kept yard and to the front door. He fished keys out of his pocket and undid the lock before opening the door. The whole house was completely dark. He stepped inside and strode through the blackness with the confidence that came from having lived in the house for years and knowing where everything was, and flicked on the light. Now illuminated, they saw an empty tub of chocolate ice cream and a large, empty bag of potato chips on the coffee table in front of the sofa, next to the TV remote.

"Savannah?" he called out. There was no reply. Danny came through the entrance next, followed by Sarah just behind, holding a gun to the small of his back. She closed the door after her and pointed to an armchair in the corner of the living room.

"Sit," she said to him, speaking like she would do to a dog. Danny saw no other choice and crossed the room to sit in the black leather seat. Once he was down he stared up at Sarah, still terrified of her but now trying to work out what the hell these people wanted with him. Had to be a ransom, right? Yeah, he thought; that must be it. His dad had left behind a lot of money, and they'd always been pretty wealthy. They must have picked him because of the loss his family had already suffered, and figured his mom would pay any ransom not to go through it all again.

"Stay," Sarah commanded.

"I'm gonna check up on Savannah," Ellison told her. He climbed up the staircase and went to the spare room. He opened it quietly, letting out just a faint squeak from the hinges as they slowly swung the door open, and flicked the light on.

Savannah was sound asleep, snuggled up on the large double bed and wrapped in the duvet. She was so small and the bed so large that she looked almost lost in it. He couldn't help but smile slightly. He'd always wanted kids but it had never turned out that way, though, and he'd accepted after divorcing Lila that it probably wouldn't happen. He wondered what the hell they were going to tell Savannah later on about her mother. How could he possibly tell her that what she thought was her mother was actually a machine? After losing her dad, too she was an orphan, he realised.

He thought about waking her up to tell her he and Sarah were back okay, but decided against it. He knew Sarah was prone to violence and didn't want Savannah to see or hear them questioning Danny: he'd try to make sure nothing happened to the kid but he knew how Sarah's temper could get and didn't know if he'd be able to stop her if she lost it.

As quietly as he could he stepped further into the room and crossed to the window, looking back to make sure Savannah wasn't stirring. She remained still, sleeping deeply and taking long, slow breaths. *She's a heavy sleeper,* he thought to himself. If they failed to stop all this that's something they'd have to change. He peeled the curtain back at the edge of the window and peered out into the street, half expecting to see a SWAT team or a terminator approaching.

Would I know one if I saw it? He asked himself. He'd suspected Kester – *Cromartie.* Deep down, after everything he'd seen leading up to that point, he'd suspected. The interview with Silberman, his believing Sarah and trying to kill him – and her subsequent rescue; the hand, the evidence at Dr Lyman's office, and actually speaking to Cromartie, sensing he wasn't normal. It had all added up, and in the back of his mind he'd seen enough to suspect it – he just hadn't wanted to believe it. What sane person would? He asked himself. But he'd believed it enough to send in the HRT team – just in case. He'd never imagined they'd be that powerful, though; that he'd be sending the team into that kind of slaughter.

Now he knew the truth. But would he recognise one if it came to the door?

He backed out of the room as quietly as he could and left Savannah alone, keeping the door open just a crack, and made his way downstairs. Sarah was still stood up in front of Danny. She turned to Ellison, still keeping one eye on their prisoner.

"We need to tie him up," she gestured to Danny. She stood guard over him as Ellison went into the kitchen, leaving her alone with the kid.

"What do you want from me?" he asked sullenly.

"Shut up," she snapped at him. Now wasn't the time for talking; she wanted him to realise just who was in control here. A minute or so later Ellison came back with a roll of duct tape and a wooden chair

from his kitchen table. He put the chair down in the middle of the room and Sarah gestured the pistol towards it.

"Move," she said to Danny. Without a word he got up and sat back down on the wooden seat. Sarah handed the gun to Ellison and took the roll of duct tape. She peeled the end off and stuck it to the chair, then went round Danny in circles, wrapping the tape tightly around his chest. When she was satisfied he was secured she worked on his arms and feet, fastening him tight to the chair.

"Just tell me what you want!" Danny growled at her, staring with a mix of fear and contempt. *Who the hell are these people?*

Sarah ignored him, went into Ellison's kitchen and saw the washing machine in the corner, next to the back door. She saw laundry inside and opened it up. She took a moment to rummage around the clothes inside the drum, noting for a moment that they were dry, and pulled out a pair of black socks. She walked back into the kitchen as she rolled them up together and scrunched them into a ball.

"Bad news," she told Danny. "These are dirty, but they won't kill you." She stood in front of him and looked down. "Open your mouth."

Danny shook his head and kept his lips firmly clamped shut, flashing Sarah a glare of defiance. *"Open your fucking mouth!"* Danny's chest exploded in pain as Sarah slammed her fist into his solar plexus and expelled all the air in his lungs, forcing his mouth open as he cried out and exhaled at the same time. The world spun around him and he gasped in agony and struggled to suck in some air, but Sarah rushed in before he could take a breath and forced the sock into his mouth, pushing it in as far as it would go and filling the cavity completely, pressing his tongue down and pinning it in place.

Danny tried to work the sock free but Sarah went back to the duct tape and wrapped it twice around his mouth and the base of his skull, preventing any chance of him working the sock loose.

Ellison watched Sarah work and frowned slightly, not approving at all of how she was treating him, but knowing well enough to keep it to himself in front of Danny; they couldn't afford to appear undivided, and whilst Ellison knew he was the softer of the two, he didn't want him to pick up on that or try to plead with him.

"He won't make any noise now," Sarah explained. The house's front door had a lock and key in the handle mounting, and she twisted until the door was secured, and pulled the key out, placing it in her pocket. "Come here," she said to Ellison as she crossed the living room again and headed into the kitchen, flicking the light off and immersing the lounge in darkness. He followed and the pair of them left Danny alone in the dark, with only his thoughts for company.

"Is it alright to leave him like that?" he asked as he and Sarah sat down at the kitchen table.

"He's not going anywhere," Sarah replied, keeping her voice low so Danny wouldn't be able to hear them. "We'll hear him if he tries to get free, the door's locked and your windows are double glazed."

"And what if he chokes?"

"He won't; I kept his nose clear so he could breathe."

Ellison found Sarah's expertise on tying up hostages to be pretty disturbing. "How many times have you done this?" he asked.

"Just once," she replied. They'd taped up the security guard at Cyberdine and tied him to the toilet, not knowing at the time about the other guard whom they'd missed, who'd raised the alarm that had brought LAPD and the T-1000 down on them. At least, she figured, there was no chance of that happening this time.

"What are we going to do with him?" Ellison asked.

"For now: nothing," Sarah said. "I want him to sweat for a while." She wanted him to sit alone in the dark and think about what they might

do to him, to get himself worked up worrying about who they were and what they wanted.

A car engine sounded outside as it drove by, causing the hairs on the back of Sarah's neck to stand on end. She glanced at her watch; *03:41.* Who the hell would be out driving around here at this time of night?

She listened as the sound from the car grew closer and rolled to a stop outside. *Shit!*

"Have you got any neighbours out?" Sarah asked.

"No," Ellison shook his head. None of his neighbours were likely to be out at this time of night and when they'd driven in he'd seen next door's car parked on the drive.

"Shit!" Sarah shot up out of her seat and instantly picked up her gun as a cold chill ran down her spine. How the hell had Kaliba found them? Ellison got up and reached for his own pistol, feeling sweat running down his temples in anticipation of an imminent fight. There could be a whole SWAT team out there, surrounding the house.

Sarah pushed her way back into the living room and flicked the lights back on, ignoring Danny as she passed him and went to the window at the front of the room. She pulled back the curtain a hair and looked outside. There was a single car out front with the lights on, idling outside. She could make out a solitary figure in the front seat but she couldn't see anyone else.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Sarah jumped as someone hammered loudly at the door and she gripped her Glock that much tighter. Ellison followed up after her and reached for the door but she stopped him. "Get behind the couch and get ready to shoot," she told him. Ellison did as she said and knelt down behind the sofa. He pulled his gun out and took aim over the back of the sofa at the front door, and swallowed nervously. He glanced at Danny and saw the expression of fear and confusion on his face. *We're in the same boat,* he

thought; none of them knew what was going to happen, but he had a feeling it wasn't going to be good.

Sarah held the gun in her right hand and reached for the door handle with her left, readying herself to take out the probable Kaliba goons on the other side. She slowly twisted the key and unlocked the door, turned the handle and pulled hard, stepping back a moment later and thrusting her gun forward like a fist.

The door opened to reveal the person on the other side. Time stopped for Sarah and her pistol dropped to the ground in utter shock. She almost joined it as he knees started to buckle beneath her. All she could do was stare with wide, disbelieving eyes at the face she never thought she'd ever see again. *"John?"*

John stood in the doorway and looked at her, a small smile on his face. "Mom," he slowly stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into a tight hug. It might have only been a week or two for her but he'd spent over three months in the future.

Sarah came back to her senses and squeezed him hard to her as tears flowed from her eyes and she sobbed hard. A small voice in her head told her she was crazy; this was another vision like when she'd seen Kyle after being shot, or the imaginary sleep clinic. But he was *here,* she could *feel* him. She pulled back for a second and took a long, hard look at him, still not fully believing he was in here. He was thinner, more rugged. The youth in his face had been worn somewhat and his eyes were harder, more intense. He looked like he'd aged since he'd left. And he needed a haircut.

John pulled her back into a hug and tried to hold himself together. After recounting Ellison and Savannah's tale of Sarah, how she'd died holding off the SWAT team assault, he was overcome seeing her alive again.

"How...?" She'd honestly thought she'd never see him again. How the hell did he get back? She saw Cameron standing silently behind

him and frowned. "You did this," she stared at Cameron with contempt. "You took him away."

John pulled back out of her embrace and stepped beside Cameron. "It was my call."

Sarah frowned but said nothing back. She'd always known John had been close to Cameron – too close for his own good: she would have melted down Cameron or blown her away a hundred times over by now if it wasn't for John. If all the telltales of the past hadn't been enough, his going forward for her was the big smack in the face. She scrutinised the sight of John next to her – not quite touching but only a fraction of a hair apart - and saw the solidarity between them: whatever had happened in the future, the bond between her son and the cyborg had solidified. She didn't know how to feel about that; she decided to ignore it for now and just be happy that he was back.

"I missed you, mom," John's face softened once more and he sniffed back a few tears. He couldn't afford to start crying now – even tears of joy – or he'd risk breaking down after everything he'd gone through, and everyone who'd died because of him in the future. He noticed her hair was different, and was thankful for the distraction. "What's with the hair?" he asked. He could hardly believe he hadn't noticed until now that she was now blonde.

"Disguise," she said plainly, knowing John would understand. She'd taught him several tricks to subtly mask his appearance enough that nobody would look at him twice.

Ellison stood up from behind the couch and moved towards them, almost as awed as Sarah to see John and Cameron stood in the doorway.

"How?" he asked, his eyes wide open in disbelief. He turned his gaze to Cameron. "We just buried you." Their plan must have worked, he realised. They'd buried Cameron in the ground and John had found her. Judging by the hardened, wary look his face, Ellison

reckoned he hadn't had an easy time doing it. He'd been aged beyond his years, and despite his young age there was no way he could call John Connor a kid.

John stepped inside the living room and saw Danny tied up to a chair, looking at him with dull, melancholy eyes. It was just like Ellison had told him. He leaned out of the doorway and waved to the car, calling Savannah over to them. She stepped out and jogged across the lawn, quickly entering the house. Cameron came in too and the living room was filled to capacity.

Savannah saw Ellison standing there, alive, and it filled her up. She opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out. She was beyond words and she trembled slightly at the shock of seeing him again. She hadn't prepared for this and she didn't know how to handle it. Her Ellison was dead – the images of him disappearing in the middle of roiling clouds of smoke and plasma were still vivid in her mind's eye and always would be, but here he was. This was the same man who, in a week's time would have been looking after her in Mexico. They were the same guy, and it took every ounce of willpower she had not to launch herself at him.

Sarah stared at the new arrival; she was slender, wiry, and with a shock of bright red hair like fire, with a hard determined look in her emerald eyes that matched John's and her own – the look of someone who'd been through far more than they should have. She stared at Ellison almost without blinking, not looking at anyone or anything else. Was she from the future, had John brought someone else back with him? "Who's she?"

"Same little girl you've got sleeping upstairs," Savannah answered.

"No way..." Sarah trailed off as she stared at the newcomer intently. It couldn't be, could it? She took a closer look at her face. She had freckles, just like Savannah; they had the same nose, the same lips; same eyes – in *colour* at least; this woman's eyes were harder than granite, though she saw a hint of softness as the girl continued to watch Ellison.

"I ate chocolate ice cream and a giant bag of Doritos when you left, and watched Hannah Montana before I went to bed."

"You seriously remember all that?" Sarah asked, shocked. How could she recall that far back if she'd just come from 2027?

"Hell no," Savannah smirked drily, "but it's all there," she pointed to the empty tub, the pack of chips, and the open DVD case on the coffee table. "I remember what happens in a few hours, though."

"Which is what?" Ellison asked, trying to get his head around the fact there were two Savannahs under the same roof. It was hard; this kind of thing was mind bending. At least she lived through Judgement Day, he thought: that was something.

"Him," Savannah pointed at Danny, staring hard at him. "He leads Kaliba here: they attack tomorrow afternoon." Ellison had made her remember every detail of that day, down to the rough time of the attack, in case he hadn't made it as far as finding John. It had been their little insurance to make sure one of them survived to get him back. *You should have made it back,* she thought sadly. *You could have sat down with yourself and a bible and gone on about Jebus until the cows came home.* She hoped he'd been right and there was something up there, but she couldn't believe it herself. Not after everything she'd been through. God was no substitute for eight-hundred rounds a minute.

Danny shook his head vigorously in denial, trying to say something but only coming managing a muffled sound from his throat.

Cameron stepped over and ripped the tape from his mouth. He spat the sock out of his mouth and breathed deeply in. He spat on the ground, desperate to get the taste of stale sweaty feet out of his mouth, and he scraped his tongue along the bottom of his two front teeth. "Thank you," he gasped. "Get me out of here," he looked up at her pleadingly.

Cameron did no such thing, however. She stared down at Danny and made no move to free him. She recognised that she'd grown and developed since arriving in the future, and she now understood the value of human life, but that didn't mean she wouldn't do what had to be done. She gripped him hard by the chin and squeezed, crushing his lower jaw in her unbreakable iron vice grip and causing him to squirm and cry out in pain.

What the hell was this girl on? He wondered as he struggled to get out of her grasp, but he could barely move as it was and she was just so strong it was unreal. *"Please! Stop!"* he cried out as tears came to his eyes and he started sobbing. "I just want to go home," he sniffled.

"Kaliba's tracking you," she told Danny. "How? Where's the tracking device?"

"What tracking device?" Danny asked, incredulous. What the hell was she talking about?

"Check his belt," Savannah suggested.

"Shoes?" Ellison supplied.

Cameron shook her head in disagreement. They would make sense but if Kaliba were run by machines then they would be far more meticulous with such a high priority employee and such a large potential security risk. "Clothes can be removed," she told them. She thought about what she would do if she wanted to track John everywhere he went, for his protection, and the answer was not to install a tracker in his clothes.

"Have you had surgery recently?" she asked Danny.

"No," he answered nervously.

"What about any shots?" Sarah asked, remembering the deactivated one in her breast and realising Danny must have a similar one in

him.

"No!" Danny snapped at her. This was ridiculous; they all belonged in the nuthouse. "What the fuck is wrong with you people? What do you *want from me?"*

John stepped forward in front of Danny and crouched down, resting on his haunches and facing the tied up young man. He stared evenly at him, trying to work out what to make of guy in front of him. Danny was shitting himself, that was for certain: from what he knew, Danny Dyson had lived a very comfortable life; he remembered the house the Dysons had lived in, and figured the kid moved in a very different world to the one he'd grown up in. *Tough luck,* John thought without a moment's sympathy. Danny was in *his* world now.

"Do you know who we are?" John asked him.

"No," Danny shook his head and stared back at John in confusion. He had no idea who the hell these people were, or what they wanted with him. He'd offered them money but that wasn't it. He looked at the brunette stood behind the guy talking to him. She was hot, and he knew it was a ridiculous thought to have when he was tied up and who knew what was going to happen to him, but there it was. Then he realised he'd seen her before: *the picture!* The surveillance photo Knowles had shown him: she'd been in it, with John and Sarah Connor. He looked at the guy in front of him and then at the older blonde woman...

"Oh shit!" he swallowed nervously as he recognised exactly who they were. He struggled in the chair but to no avail – not that it would have mattered even if he somehow did manage to break free: there were five of them and only one of him, and the bald guy and Sarah had guns on them.

"Now you know," Sarah smiled grimly, next to Ellison.

"You're all crazy," Danny spat out. "Robots from the future, machines waging war against people... it wasn't enough you murdered my

father, was it; you've got to kill me too, right?"

"It's all true," John snapped Danny's attention back to him. He gripped Danny by the chin and angled his head straight towards his face, making sure he had a good look at every scar and bruise that had marred his skin. He was clean but still unshaven and two week's worth of growth had sprouted out from his jaw and neck. "I've been to the future." He glared hard at Danny, locking their gazes together, and Danny shivered as he saw the tempered steel in his opposite. His eyes were flat, hard, intense, and he looked almost as if part of him were somewhere else.

"Look into my eyes," John told him. "Take a good, long look: imagine the things I've seen. All of this; it's gone: ash, rubble; that's all that's left – that and the machines hunting for you, day and night."

Danny didn't believe him; this was all made up delirium based on some fantasy they all bought into, but as he looked into John's eyes he saw something he couldn't identify; he'd seen it in Knowles and his mercenaries but it was much more intense in this instance. The eyes of someone who'd seen combat, who'd had to take a life, maybe? Apart from the stubble beard, the rough, scraggly hair and the pale, lily-white skin, he looked like he could have just come off the front line in Vietnam. Whatever the truth was; John Connor scared him, even more than that psycho bitch mother of his.

John got back up to his feet when he saw he hadn't completely swayed Danny, and thought about what he could do to prove it. He really didn't want Cameron to have to peel her arm off this time; he knew she would but he wouldn't ask her to do that.

She answered his unasked question and stepped forwards, gripping him by the shirt. Cameron lifted Danny up by the cotton, chair and all, and raised him into the air.

"What the hell?" Danny stared down at her in fear and utter shock at how such a petite girl could lift him clean off the ground like that.

Cameron decided to push further and she made her eyes glow a brilliant blue beneath her irises. "He's telling you the truth," she informed Danny, her voice deliberately as tinny and mechanical as possible. She scanned him for any reactions and felt him shiver as she spoke. He was sweating and shaking and she could see he was afraid of her. People often where when they knew what she was, and she'd learnt that she could use that to her advantage.

"I'm a machine, Danny," she switched her voice to mimic his own perfectly. "Terminator – infiltration unit: built to imitate and kill humans." She lowered him steadily down to the ground and noted his dramatically increased pulse and breathing rate. But she wasn't done yet. "I need a knife," she told Savannah, noting that Danny gulped nervously at the mention of 'knife' and knowing he expected her to kill or torture him.

The redhead turned to the kitchen without hesitation and went through the door. She opened several drawers and rummaged through until he found the cutlery one. She picked out short, sharp vegetable knife, with a blade only three inches long. Most people would think you couldn't do much with a knife so small, but she knew differently: in the hands of an expert three inches was more than enough to do some serious damage. As good as she was she had no doubt that Cameron would be better. She picked out another similar knife and stuffed it into the hem of her skirt, and fished around for any other useful ones. They were either all too big or too blunt, so she stuck with the small one for now.

She returned to the living room and handed Cameron the vegetable knife. Danny watched the blade with wide, scared eyes as it passed between them.

Cameron brushed her hair away from the left side of her head with her free hand, and reached up with the knife.

John smiled slightly as he realised what Cameron was going to do. If this wasn't the proof Danny needed then nothing would do. He

thought back to when Uncle Bob did it for Miles and his smile grew in anticipation of how Danny would react.

With her free hand holding her hair out of the way Cameron expertly cut into her scalp and dragged the blade along, creating a rough incision into her skin, deep down until the tip scraped along her skull.

"What the fuck..." Danny tried to look away but Savannah grabbed his head and forced him to look. How the hell could she cut into her own scalp like that, without even flinching?

"You fucking watch," she growled.

He stared forward in horror, unable to move his head away and with no other choice but to look on at the gruesome sight of Cameron cutting into her own head. She cut a large semicircle into her scalp and peeled the flap of skin to the side, exposing the shiny metal skull beneath, stained with crimson blood. Danny just stared, mouth agape at the skull; metal, not bone: what the hell...

In Cameron's expert hands it took only a flick of the knife to open the port cover, which she held in her hand. She got down onto her knees in front of Danny and revealed her chip, embedded deep inside her skull, surrounded by a faint blue glow emanating from within.

"What the hell is that?" he asked, unable to stop staring now even if Savannah wasn't holding his head in place. They weren't bullshitting him. *Shit:* she must have been one of those cyborgs his employers had warned him about. They'd never found the one they'd said would be in Zeiracorp; was she the one they'd meant?

"That's my CPU," Cameron answered. "Neural-net processor."

"It can't be," he whispered, not believing what he was seeing. Kaliba had told him about cyborgs that looked human but he'd expected some clunking, clumsy thing, human appearance only in the most basic sense. Essentially like a moving mannequin. He'd never expected them to look *this* human. How the hell was this possible?

The technology for this didn't exist. A walking, talking, thinking cyborg, that looked and sounded completely human, and even *bled.* Still, he couldn't quite believe all of this. "They can't build things like that yet; it's impossible."

"Not for about twelve years," Savannah replied.

"This is all real," he sniffed, realising they were telling the truth. Her CPU told him everything he'd needed to know. He'd grown up around computers, knew everything about them, and he knew nothing that small could control a machine like that. There wasn't a computer on earth that small that could essentially be a brain for something as complex as the machine girl in front of him. Not even the Japanese were that far ahead. She *was* from the future. Everything they'd said was true. "What are you gonna do with me?"

"We're not here to kill you, Danny," Ellison said calmly. "We're here to stop you making a mistake that will get billions of other people killed."

"I don't understand," he replied meekly.

"You say it," Sarah told John. "I've told it a hundred times now." She was sick of trying to tell people horrific truth that nobody wanted to hear, and worse, being branded crazy for it.

"You're building an AI for the Kaliba Group," Cameron stated, matter of fact. Danny nodded once.

"It's for the Air Force," he said. "A functioning AI's worth billions to them."

"Your AI blows up the world and kills everyone," Savannah spelt it out for him. "Everyone dies and it's *your fault."*

"No," Danny shot back. "I wouldn't... I... I'd never do that." He couldn't accept it; there was no way he was responsible for destroying the whole world.

"Not you," John replied. "Kaliba: they turn your AI into Skynet and turn it against mankind. You're working for people who are trying to bring about the end of the world."

"I won't do it," Danny said firmly. "I'll quit."

Sarah shook her head slowly. "Your father tried that. He died trying to stop it from happening. These aren't the kind of people you can just hand your notice to and walk away from."

Danny looked at all of them in turn, his eyes pleading still. "So what the hell can I do?"

"You can start by telling us where you had any shots since you started working for Kaliba," John said.

He nodded slowly and breathed in, trying to think back. "I went on a few research trips to Asia," he recalled. "Not long after I took the job. Japan, China, South Korea; my doctor said I'd need shots to travel there, for Malaria and all. I had them a week before I went."

"Where did they give you the shot?" Cameron asked.

"Right arm," he replied. "Crease of the elbow."

Cameron stood up and placed the port cover back over her chip, sealing it in place, and flattened her scalp back over it. She'd stitch it back in place later on to ensure it healed properly, but for now there were more important issues. She cut through the tape holding Danny 's arms in place and held up his right one. She turned to John and Savannah.

"I need you to hold him," she instructed them. John held down onto Danny's shoulders, making sure he'd sit still in the chair, knowing what Cameron was about to do. Savannah gripped his arm by the wrist and held it out straight, keeping a firm grasp on the limb.

"What are you doing?" Danny asked as Cameron lowered the bloody knife to the crook of his elbow. "I told you what you wanted to know." Why were they doing this to him when he'd tell them everything?

"There's a tracking device in your arm," Cameron explained to him. "We need to remove it or Kaliba will know where we are. Hold very still: this will hurt. A lot."

Without hesitation Cameron sliced the blade down into his arm. Danny screamed out and bucked in his seat as the knife carved into him, but John held him down firmly. He cried out and struggled to pull his arm away but Savannah clutched onto it, and he had no choice but to take the searing, white hot pain as the blade cut roughly into his skin – more suited to chopping vegetables than cutting into flesh, it was coarse and made it even more painful. "Don't move," Cameron repeated firmly as she finished her incision and started to probe the inside of his elbow with the tip of the knife, scanning with her keen vision for any sign of something that shouldn't be in there. She found it quickly but saw that it would be complicated.

"Its two millimetres from the radial artery," she told him. "You have to be very still; if you move I could cut it, and you'll bleed to death."

"He won't handle it," Sarah said, watching as he'd flinched when the knife had only just touched his skin, let alone cut through it. It wasn't anything to be ashamed of, she knew. Some people had a high pain threshold and some didn't; it was just bad luck for Danny that he fell into the latter group. "He'll flinch."

"Let him go," Cameron told John and Savannah. Both released him and stepped away. She wasn't going to cause him anymore pain than absolutely necessary, and she agreed with Sarah. If it was Sarah, or John, or Savannah she was operating on, she'd know they could cope with the pain. But Danny would flinch; it was too much of a risk to his life. But without any anaesthesia there was only one option. Cameron drew her fist back and punched Danny hard in the face. He cried out as his head snapped backwards and a moment

later he fell limp, leaning forward where he was still taped to the chair from the waist up. Cameron placed two fingers by his carotid artery and checked for a pulse. It was slow and steady; he was unconscious but she knew that it was difficult to predict when he might come to again.

She worked quickly, twisting the knife into his elbow, and without him struggling it took only a moment for her to extract it. She held the tracking device up between her thumb and forefinger; a miniature transmitter that looked like just a small thread of wire, four millimetres long, if that, and half a millimetre wide. "It's out," she told the others. She lowered Danny's arm onto his lap and held it out for the others to see.

"Crush it," Savannah said.

Sarah nodded in agreement. "Stop it transmitting."

"Not yet," John said. He turned to Savannah. "They come tomorrow afternoon, right? When its daytime?"

"Yeah."

"We've got a good few hours until dawn so we know they won't be here for a while. If they lose the signal they'll know we're onto them and they'll come sooner." They might as well stick with what they knew, he thought. Another thought struck him, too. "I'm sick of running and hiding," it was all he'd done for weeks before he'd met Ellison and Savannah in the future, and he was tired of it; time to take the fight back to them and fire the first shot across the bow. "Have we got any more Semtex?"

"Yeah," Sarah said, wondering what her son was up to. "Why?"

John's face set in stone as he turned to his mom, his expression more terse and serious than she'd ever seen in him before. "We're going to send Kaliba a message: we're declaring war." They'd make their first strike against them here.

Chapter 24

Two black SUVs drove down the street in convoy; the only vehicles moving along the stretch of middle class, suburban neighbourhood. They didn't stand out very much; the casual observer would glance up at them for a brief moment and not give them a moment's attention. The windows were heavily opaque so nobody on the outside could see in. If they had been able to, however, anyone would have had quite a shock at the sight of the heavily armed occupants inside.

Knowles sat in the front passenger seat and cradled his HK-G36 to his chest. He pulled back the cocking lever and checked chamber for what must have been the hundredth time. Once again, as every other time before, there was a round chambered and the magazine was secured tightly into the rifle. He sat nervously inside the car, sweating slightly underneath the black tactical gear, and small rivulets rolled down from his temples beneath the Kevlar helmet. That prick Coleman and his other associates were pissed off for what they'd seen as his failure – *'incompetence',* was the word they'd barely restrained themselves from saying – although Knowles recognised Sarah Connor's trick with the vagrant for what it was: a brilliant piece of deception worthy of any chess grandmaster.

What made him even more nervous though was Baldy sat in the driving seat behind the wheel; he didn't move, didn't blink, and hadn't said a word. Who the fuck was this guy? Whilst everyone else had chattered and joked around on the ride here up until a few moments ago, Baldy had remained silent, concentrating only on the road ahead.

Knowles picked up his radio so he could speak to the guys in the other car as well as the ones around him. "We're one minute from

our target," he announced. "Alpha Team with me, secure the front; Bravo Team takes the back entrance."

"They usually do!" Barnett – the youngest man in their team quipped, earning a few guffaws of laughter from the others.

"Our priority is Danny Dyson: he has to be extracted alive at all costs. Everyone else is secondary; his captors are armed and dangerous; don't underestimate them."

"Sarah Connor and her accomplices are hostile," Baldy finally spoke. "They're to be terminated on sight."

What? Knowles cast a sideways glance at the large slaphead driving the car. That was the first he'd heard about it. He leaned towards Baldy and spoke quietly in his ear. "Those aren't our orders," he said. "We're a rescue mission; not hit men."

"We're to eliminate all hostiles," Baldy replied. "Anyone in the house who is not Danny Dyson is deemed hostile."

"What're you, a fucking robot or something?" Knowles rolled his eyes and muttered quietly. *'Deemed hostile':* this guy was a fucking joke. He knew he should have insisted on leading the team himself. "Just remember: I'm in command here," he said quietly.

Baldy said nothing and continued driving. They rounded a corner and pulled up outside the target house. Before the car had even stopped moving Knowles' door was open and he was out on the pavement. A split second later the team from his car bomb-burst out of the back, followed up by Bravo Team, which moved around to the back of the house. Knowles swallowed nervously and felt the hairs stick up on the back of his neck as a chill ran down his spine. He always got the same feeling before he went into combat, the tense nervousness soldiers the world over felt just before everything kicked off. He pushed it to the back of his mind and let the training and years of experience take over. He'd faced down Special Republican Guard in Gulf One, fought the Taliban in Afghanistan, and battled

against insurgents in Fallujah in Operation Iraqi Freedom: after them, Sarah Connor and her accomplices hardly seemed like anything to be afraid of, he reminded himself.

"Gas, now!" Knowles shouted to his team. One of the men smashed the window with the butt of his rifle and threw a gas grenade into the front room. They waited a few seconds for it to disperse then Knowles kicked the front door open and threw in a flashbang, backing away for a second until the thing exploded in brilliant light and deafening, ear splitting noise.

He stormed into the house and swept his rifle across, searching for targets. There were none in sight. Nothing came to greet them and there was no sign of Danny; the living room was completely empty. "Living room's clear. Orson, Jones: search upstairs. Barnett: with me." Knowles and Barnett passed through the living room and into the kitchen. The younger man kicked the door open and the pair burst into the kitchen; Knowles aiming to the left and Barnett to the right. Again, there was nothing. Three dirty dishes stood up on a rack on the sink, along with three forks and three glasses. *At least we know how many of them we're up against now.*

"Clear!" Barnett shouted enthusiastically. Knowles had read Barnett's file from his employers when he'd picked the team. Only twenty-six years old and an ex-Ranger: he'd had no idea at first why the man wasn't still serving, but Barnett had told him he'd had a friend who'd gone private and was earning more per day in Iraq than he'd done in a week in the army, and it was all tax-free.

"Upstairs is clear," Orson's voice sounded on Knowles' radio.

"Where the fuck are they?" Knowles growled.

Baldy stepped through the front door and strode into the room, looking around and scanning his surroundings.

"They're not here," Knowles told him. It didn't matter, he realised; Danny had a tracking device implanted in him, and he'd been

assured they could use it to find him practically anywhere on the planet, as long as they had satellites overhead. He pulled out the modified iPhone Coleman had given him and looked at the screen.

"According to this he's right here," he said. The blip indicating Danny's location was right there; in the room with him.

"Give it to me," Baldy commanded. Knowles pushed the iPhone into his palm and already started to wonder what was going on here. He pressed on his radio to talk to all his men.

"Check for a basement and attic," he told them. "Report back when you do. Don't try and go in alone; wait for backup." He turned to Baldy. "I think they're below us," he said. *Shit!* If that were the case then they just lost the element of surprise. That could cost them dearly if Connor and co decided they weren't going to be taken alive. He stepped towards the front door and stood in the frame, thinking about his next move. If they found Connor and Danny in the basement or the attic it would be a nightmare getting them out. Fighting their way down a staircase would be bad enough; if they were above them it would be impossible. They weren't equipped to scale the roof and blast their way in from above; they'd have to level the building to get them out, and there was no way of doing that without killing Danny.

Baldy stared intently at the iPhone and looked around the room. The screen indicated that Danny Dyson was exactly three feet in front of his position. In front of him was a black leather sofa, which he scanned thoroughly. He spotted a small bloodstain on one of the cushions and stepped towards it. He lifted one of the cushions up to investigate. In a fraction of a second Baldy's vision focused on a wire that became visible as he lifted the cushion up, connected to a small beige brick the size of a block of butter, and on top of the block was Danny Dyson's bloodstained tracking device. In a fraction of a second the wire stretched out, tautened and pulled loose from the block.

KABOOM! The sofa exploded outwards in an eruption of flame and threw Baldy back against the far wall of the living room. Further explosions rocked through the house a second later as more devices detonated and shook the foundations. Smoke billowed out as the sofa burned and an alarm triggered from the ceiling, bleeping harshly as its sensors detected a fire. Knowles instinctively ducked as the blast rocked through the room. As it died down he got up and started towards Baldy, reaching for the wound dressing he carried in the pouch on his vest.

"Medic!" he shouted out at the top of his voice. One of Bravo Team was their medical technician; where the hell was he? Knowles heard wailing and screams emanating from other wounded men upstairs and started to move back into the house to help. He stopped cold as Baldy sat up, revealing a burnt, charred mess of pulped flesh and claret, and underneath it *a metal skull,* with a glowing red orb where an eyeball used to be . "What the fuck..." Knowles stared with wide eyes and a slack, open jaw in disbelief at what he was seeing. "You *really are* a robot." Baldy was a goddamn machine. All along he'd been warned about cyborgs and he'd been working with one this whole time. A red orb glowed from underneath the torn, squashed remains of an eyeball as Baldy stared at him, starting to slowly get back to his feet and reach for the gun that had been blown out of his grip.

"Fuck this!" Knowles backed out of the front door and ran as fast as he could for the lead 4x4. He dived into the driver's seat, slammed the door shut as he slid in, and put the car into drive. Baldy emerged at the front door as he hit the gas. The wheels spun and screeched, kicking out a cloud of black smoke for a second until the tyres gripped the tarmac and Knowles tore down the road as fast as he could, daring to check the rear view mirror for a split second to see Baldy growing smaller as he left the house in his dust.

He kept his foot on the gas and drove quickly but carefully through the neighbourhood, turning several corners to throw anyone who might be following off his tail. What the fuck was that thing? It was a

damn cyborg but what was it doing working for Kaliba? None of this made any sense and he knew that too much adrenaline was coursing through his veins for him to think rationally, and he had to calm down before he tried to work out what the hell was going on, and then what the hell he was going to do about it all.

Two cars sped along the highway; a Mercedes and a Lexus, both black, and both heading nowhere in particular; just on the move, keeping mobile so they were harder targets to track.

The Lexus took the lead. Savannah drove whilst Ellison was in the passenger seat and her younger self sat quietly in the back, fast asleep with her head lolling to the side. In the trunk were their weapons and explosives.

Ellison glanced sideways at Savannah once again for the umpteenth time, still getting his head around all this. It was so strange, having two Savannahs in the car at the same time, seeing exactly how the little girl in the back seat would like when she grew up. She'd be beating the boys off with a stick in years to come, he thought. The idea of it was a worry as well as a relief; he knew just what teenage boys and young men were like, but at the same time at least she'd live long enough for all that.

"Are you gonna say anything or just stare at me?" Savannah asked, a slight grin on her face despite her words. She didn't mean it harshly at all; she could see his thinking, almost, and knew he was probably having a hard time making sense of all of it. It was strange for her, too, to see the man who'd been like a father to her for all those years – alive and well – plus seeing herself in miniature in the back seat. *I can't believe I had pigtails back then,* she thought.

"It's alright," she told him. "This is weird for me too."

"Glad it's not just me then," he breathed out in relief, feeling the tension break between them. "What happened in the future?" he asked. "I take it we didn't stop Judgement Day." That much was pretty clear, he figured. Otherwise they'd have never got back.

"We didn't," Savannah said sadly. "The whole thing went to shit. Without John the machines won."

"How did you get involved in all this?"

Savannah breathed out as she recounted it all. "After Sarah was killed we fled south into Mexico. When the bombs went off we stayed in hiding for years until John was due to arrive; we moved north of the border and set up camps in LA, and searched for him. Eventually we found him, unburied Cameron, and got her and John together again."

"What happened to Weaver and John Henry?" Ellison asked.

"John Henry's part of Cameron now," she told him. "Weaver..." Savannah glanced behind her and made sure her mini self was still asleep, not wanting her to hear about it. "The liquid metal bought it just before we came back; she covered us – saved my life, actually." Savannah hadn't thought about it before, but she had to admit that without the T-1001 she would have died in Ziercorp. She felt seriously conflicted about that; she still hated the liquid metal bitch, but she'd also owed her life to it. Seeing as the machine was dead, she figured she could allow its stock to go up a notch in her book. That put it at notch one.

"And me?" Ellison asked. She hadn't mentioned him apart from them hiding in Mexico.

Savannah clenched her jaw slightly and sniffled as she tried to block out the mental image of his death. It was no good; it played out before her mind's eye yet again and she couldn't help it as a few teardrops rolled down her cheek as she turned her head away and concentrated on the road.

Ellison saw the pained expression on her face and it didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened to him. "Never mind," he said apologetically.

"Do me a favour," Savannah said to him as she wiped the tears away from her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

She glanced back at her past self, sleeping soundly in the back seat. "Look after her," she said to him. "You're all she's got left."

"I... I don't know the first thing about raising kids," he said, realising it probably sounded like he was making excuses. That wasn't it at all, but he was useless with children, he didn't know how to take care of a little girl.

"Trust me," Savannah turned to him with a sad smile on her lips. "You'll be great."

The Mercedes pulled up ahead of them and John waved out the window to Savannah as they passed by and took the lead. She nodded back to him and watched as the car indicated right turning into the outside lane as they approached an exit ramp. She followed after them and took the same turning. She had no idea where the hell they were going; Sarah had just told them to head east and she'd take the lead eventually. A safe house, Savannah supposed.

Little Savannah stirred in the back seat, opened her eyes and stretched her arms out with a large, gaping yawn as she rejoined the land of the living. She looked out the window and saw the city whipping by as they sped along the road. "Where are we going?" she asked. Nobody had told her anything about what was happening, and she didn't know who the other lady in the car was.

"Somewhere safe," Ellison said before the older Savannah could reply. He knew she would probably have said she didn't know, and the last thing the little girl needed was more uncertainty in her life.

When they were through with all this – *if* they ever got through all this and stopped Judgement Day – they'd have to sit down at some point and decide what they would do with Little Savannah.

"When can I see mommy again?" Little Savannah asked, looking up at the two grownups with a hint of sadness in her eyes. "I want to go home."

It was all Savannah could do to not tear up again at the thought of it all. She clenched her jaw and gripped the wheel tighter as she decided what to say. She checked the road ahead and saw it was fairly clear; it was straight, no intersections, and there was nothing ahead of them apart from the Mercedes in the next lane. She turned back in her seat to face her younger self.

"Your mommy's dead," she said flatly. "She's not coming back. I'm sorry." She turned forward again and watched the road. Little Savannah stared blankly for a moment, stunned as the words hit her. It took a few seconds for what was said to take effect and when it did it hit her like a sledgehammer.

"Mommy..." tears filled her eyes and she sobbed loudly, a moment later she leaned over to the side and buried her face in the seat beside her.

Ellison turned and watched as she broke down in the back seat and started wailing, crying loudly and shaking as her sobs wracked her body. He snapped his head at the Savannah driving and glared. "Why did you just say it like that?"He said, incredulous as to how callous the young woman was. Clearly if he'd raised her in the future he hadn't done a very good job. "She's just a kid, show a little compassion."

Savannah shook her head slowly, keeping her eyes on the road. She gestured for Ellison to lean in closer, not wanting her mini-self to hear what she had to say. Ellison understood and moved in towards her, craning his ear closer to her mouth.

"She's better off thinking Weaver's dead," she replied simply. "Trust me on that one."

He honestly had no idea what to say to that. Obviously nobody knew Savannah like... well, *Savannah.* Ellison watched her features and saw a brief flash of anger mixed in with sadness. Clearly the Future-Savannah was a troubled young woman, and he wondered how she'd come to learn the truth. It must have been seriously devastating, for her to tell her past self her mom was dead, *to spare her* from further grief. What had happened to the sweet little girl in the back seat? He wondered. Somewhere along the line she'd hardened; she reminded him of Sarah: the two women would probably have a lot to talk about if they got together.

He nodded to her, accepting she had a point. But still... she could have been a little more tactful about it. Nobody, especially a child, should have to hear about their parents like that. He wondered what had happened in the future to make her how she was.

She leaned in towards him this time and spoke. "Promise me something: don't *ever* tell her the truth." Her eyes bore down into his and Ellison saw beyond the hardness; something softer and more vulnerable inside her; a hint of the scared little girl who right now was sobbing in the back seat. Weaver was clearly a weakness for Future-Savannah; a cause of major heartache he could see her trying desperately to forget.

"I won't," he nodded. He then reclined his seat as far back as it would go, unbuckled his seatbelt and slid into the back next to Little-Savannah, then sent the chair forward and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his embrace. He had no idea what to say to her; what *could* he say to a little girl who just found out her mom was dead? He settled for nothing at all, and just held her, softly stroking her hair and doing his best to comfort her.

I'll look after you, he thought. He caught the future Savannah's gaze in the rear view mirror and nodded to her in silent agreement. Little Savannah would never know the truth; he decided he'd take care of

her, and make sure she never had to go through what her future self in the front seat had done, whatever it took.

The two cars pulled up outside a small, single storey house in the desert, a few miles north of Big Bear. It was in the middle of nowhere and their nearest neighbours were half a mile away; Sarah had checked it a while ago before deciding to lease it. The safehouse was one she'd set up a while ago; the same one she'd sent Derek and Cameron to when she'd taken John to stay with Charley at the lighthouse. Now it seemed it was finally going to be used.

The Mercedes pulled to a stop first of all, followed by the Lexus a moment later. Before the Merc had even stopped moving John flung open his door and stepped outside.

"Mom, stay with Danny," he said as he moved to the back of the car. Cameron exited the driver's seat a moment after him and joined him at the rear as he opened the trunk to reveal their remaining weapons. He grabbed one of the HK-417s – he was so used to the weapon that it felt comforting in his hands, like an old friend being welcomed back, almost. He slotted a magazine into place and charged the rifle as Cameron picked out an AK and did the same. Savannah came up beside them and picked up the remaining HK-417, loaded and cocked it, and joined them.

Sarah remained in the back seat with Danny and held her Glock firm. It went against every fibre of her being to sit in the rear whilst John led from the front but his tone as he'd spoken had been pretty clear: he'd given her an order and she'd been so shocked at it that she'd simply done as she was told. She kept a firm eye on the young man next to her, however, and Danny might have been convinced they were telling the truth but she still didn't trust him. He'd have to earn it.

John pointed his battle rifle forward and marched ahead, as did Cameron beside him. Savannah covered their approach as they

moved and kept a keen eye out for anyone or anything that might jump out at them. They stopped a few feet away from the front door and both of them watched the house for any signs of movement or recent activity. They needed to make sure the place hadn't been compromised.

The wind breezed gently through the air and blew up small plumes of dust, but other than that Cameron detected no signs of movement outside the house or within. She scanned the roof but there were no snipers lying in wait, nor could she see anyone looking out of the windows. She switched to infrared tracking and made another sweep; her sensors weren't one-hundred-percent in the heat of the desert so she couldn't be certain; the windows were all closed and the temperature inside the room would likely exceed that of the human body, masking the signatures of anyone inside. In the future she and other machines hadn't needed to worry about that as the surrounding temperature was always low and body heat from a human was obvious.

John stepped forwards and reached for the doorknob but Cameron stopped him and held him just out of reach. "I'll go first," she said, her voice leaving John in no doubt that she wasn't going to argue about this. If the safehouse had been booby-trapped it was better if she triggered them rather than anyone else. He stepped back and kept his rifle raised as Cameron took out the key Sarah had given her, undid the lock, pushed the door open and stepped inside.

There were no explosions, no eruptions of gunfire and nothing attacked Cameron as she entered. She stepped further into the house and swung the gun around as she did a sweep of the main room. There was nothing inside; only an old three piece suite and a coffee table in the living room. The door connecting to the kitchen at the back of the house was open and she could see out the window at the rear wall. There was nothing there either.

John and Savannah followed in after her and the latter trained her rifle down the turning to the right of the living room, where the bedrooms and bathroom were located. "I'll check it out down here,"

she said as she broke away from the main room. John followed after her into the small passage.

"Take the ones on the right," he told her. "I'll check left." There were two doors on each side. John pushed one open with his foot and winced as the hinges creaked loudly. He thrust the weapon into the darkened room and saw nothing. He reached for the light and illuminated the room in a dim yellow glow, revealing a single bed made up to almost military precision. *Mom's handiwork,* he noted. Apart from the bed the room was empty.

"Mine are clear," Savannah called out. *Jesus, that was fast,* John thought. He quickly left the room and opened the other door; it was only a cupboard and it was full to the brim of canned food. Tinned beans, meats, vegetables, meals in cans, condensed milk in cans, dried foods of every kind; there was MREs that he figured she must have bought from an army surplus store. He picked one up and read it: *teriyaki chicken* ; his mouth practically watered at the thought of it. "I'm having this one," he mumbled as he stuffed the silvery foil package into the large thigh pocket of his combat shorts. He'd save it for later. There were stacks of bottled water, sterilising tablets, and all the paraphernalia associated with outdoor survival.

"One thing about my mom," he commented to Savannah as she leaned over his shoulder and peered at the stacks of canned and dried foods. "She plans ahead." He didn't even know when she'd had time to put all this together; it must have been when he'd wasted months of his life seeing Riley, he thought with a pang of regret. Whilst he'd messed around and tried to run away from his life and his destiny, she'd constantly worked away tirelessly for him. As had Cameron. He decided he was going to make it up to both of them; he didn't know how, but he would.

"Its all clear," Cameron called out. She went to the front door and nodded once to Sarah and Ellison. They took out Danny and Little-Savannah, locked up the cars and led them into the house.

Once inside they closed the door after them, sealing themselves inside from the dust blowing out gently across the flat rocky desert. Sarah looked out the window at the cars outside; they stuck out like a bulldog's balls but there was nothing they could do about it. There just wasn't anywhere they could hide them.

"What's our next move?" Ellison asked as he sat Little-Savannah down on the couch and stared sullenly at the floor. The tide of tears had stemmed but she'd been silent for the latter half of the trip and had just stared out the window. Danny walked over to an armchair and flopped down on it, noting how hard and scratchy it was; nothing like the plush furniture he'd furnished his own place with. He never got how people managed to rough it like this.

"Don't get too comfy," John stared at him. He stood over Danny, still holding his gun in his hands, as were Savannah and Cameron, all looking menacing to the young man and suddenly making him feel very, very small in his chair.

"What more do you want from me?" Danny asked, confused. He rubbed the bandage on his arm and winced in pain. He couldn't believe they'd cut him open like that, like a piece of meat; they might be the good guys but they were goddamn savages.

"A lot more," John said, leading the interrogation on his own. "Where's your AI? Where's Skynet?"

Danny looked at John, the machine, and the redhead woman; all armed and all staring right at him. It was clear they meant business, and they wouldn't rest until they'd got what they wanted from him. What terrified him was that he didn't have it. "I don't know," he said.

"Oh, come off it!" Savannah rolled her eyes. Was that the best the kid could come up with?

"You're trying to tell us," Sarah said, "that you worked on this thing for what, years, and you don't even know where it is?" She shared the exact same sentiment as Savannah. The kid was full of shit; it

would take a beating or two to get Danny to talk, she realised. It wouldn't take much, he didn't look particularly strong; a few slaps and he'd start singing like a canary.

"I'm telling you the truth," Danny protested as he sank back into the chair, shrinking away from the trio in front of him. Sarah joined them to become four, intimidating him further. "Honestly, I never knew where we went: they picked us up from an airfield and flew us in a helicopter. Blacked out – no windows in the back or anything; took us out to the middle of nowhere, a mountain range somewhere.

"Sierra Nevada Mountains," Cameron replied. That was an extremely large area to search; they'd be unlikely to ever find it.

"They'd fly us out – me and a team of computer scientists, engineers and so on – for shifts: two weeks on, one week back in the world. Nobody said a word about where we were going, not even the pilots."

Cameron watched Danny carefully, observing every blink and twitch on his face and analysing his expression and body language. She believed what he said; it would be logical for Kaliba to only provide what information was absolutely necessary for their unwitting employees to do their jobs. And she could tell by the way Danny looked up at her that he was afraid of her. She flashed him a smile and he backed even further into his chair, his eyes widening slightly.

She looked to John and Cameron and they backed away. John crouched down again so he was level with Danny, deciding to try and speak to him man to man rather than as a captor interrogating a prisoner. Savannah still stood with her weapon in her hands, clearly not caring that she was almost as scary as Cameron to the young man.

"Danny," John said, keeping his voice even despite the desperation he felt to find out every last scrap of information they could use to stop Skynet. "What *can* you tell us about Kaliba?"

Two men strolled side by side through an immaculate, almost sterile, corridor. The passageway was surprisingly quiet considering just how busy the installation around them was. The corridor itself was like the calm eye in a storm of activity around them as scores of workers – engineers, scientists, computer programmers and security personnel – laboured diligently and tirelessly. The two men were also hard at work, but to the untrained eye it appeared they were simply chatting idly.

They couldn't have been more different people: one was lean, fit, wore the dark blue uniform of the United States Air Force, holding his peaked cap under his arm and revealing a head full of short greying hair. The other was dressed in an expensively tailored grey suit, with pale blue silk shirt and a plain, darker blue tie, and had grown flabby and pasty after years of overindulgence in the new world granted to him. One was in the business of protecting his country, and the other was planning to destroy the world.

Coleman led Colonel Schiff through the corridor and into a door on the right, emerging into a vast, cavernous hangar the size of a football pitch. It was easily the busiest part of the facility, with dozens of men and women working inside. Schiff's eyes widened as he took in the hangar and everything going on around him.

"My god," he breathed, awestruck at the nearest machine to him. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before. It was a mass of sharp edges, angles, and constantly moving parts. Its wings – if that's what they were – never seemed to stay still for a moment; they constantly shifted and altered. It was sleek, angular, and looked almost alien. No wonder we've had so many crank calls about these ' *California Drones',* Schiff thought. If he saw this thing out in the desert he'd swear to god it was a UFO, too. The constantly moving wings, engines and other parts gave the aircraft an almost insect-like quality. In his mind's eye he imagined a swarm of the aircraft protecting a giant hive somewhere.

"What *are* these things?" he asked, unable to take his eyes off the things.

"May I present to you," Coleman said proudly, sweeping his hand at the aircraft. "The XQ-84 – we've nicknamed it the *Dragonfly.* " He saw Schiff staring in confusion at the machines and decided to explain further. "They're designed from the ground up to operate with our AI: completely computer controlled, capable of fully autonomous flight or remote piloted by Skynet."

Coleman smiled with a sense of pride at the sleek UCAVs in the hangar: unlike the crude drone aircraft they'd used to kill Catherine Weaver with, these versions had been refined, improved upon, and turned into combat-capable killing machines. They were much larger; three times the length of the prototype, more solidly built and they'd removed the third engine offset from the front of the fuselage and replaced it with a much smaller one in the centre of the body, concealed by ports on the back and belly of the aircraft that would open when it needed to hover.

"This is all a bit much," Schiff replied, taken aback at the scale of Kaliba's operations.

Coleman shrugged it off. "We want to prove to you just how effective our AI really is."

"Are you planning to include these aircraft into Exercise Blue Star?" the colonel asked. He counted at least a dozen of the strange, futuristic-looking drones, and wondered how the hell they'd even came up with such a thing. He'd never, ever seen an aircraft like it before, and he was curious to see how the things would operate on the battlefield. Blue Star was a planned military exercise that would simulate a miniature war in the Mojave Desert, between the army's 4th Infantry Division and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force; the former operating with air support from the air force and the latter relying on their own AV-8B Harriers. Skynet would coordinate the Marines against the army's efforts. If the Marines won then Colonel Schiff would recommend the contract be awarded to Kaliba, and

their AI adopted to coordinate the entire military. It was the largest game of chess ever played; man versus machine.

"Only if you want them to be," Coleman replied, suppressing a grin at Schiff's reaction. "But Harriers against F/A-22s doesn't seem like a fair fight to me." *That should get him interested,* he thought.

The colonel stepped closer to the nearest Dragonfly and reached out to touch it the narrow, thin wingtip protruding outward from the circular engine nacelle, but hesitated just before his fingers made contact. It looked far too skinny to be a wing; it was more like a helicopter's rotary blade in width. Suddenly the wing split down the middle and opened outward like a pair of scissor blades separating. *"Jesus!"* Schiff snapped his hand back away from the thing as his heart skipped a beat. "What the hell was that?"

One of the engineers stepped towards him and nodded a greeting. "Variable geometry scissor wingtips; they close up together to reduce drag in flight, and open to help slow it down when it needs to."

"Colonel," Coleman gave out a slight grin as he turned to the officer. "How would you like a demonstration?"

"Of course," Schiff nodded. This thing was so strange, so alien, and it had captivated his attention. He wanted to see if its flying was as different as its appearance.

"Activate units four through seven," Coleman said to the engineer. A shrill beeping sounded and his pocket vibrated. "One moment," he excused himself from the engineer and the colonel and stepped away as he pulled his cell phone out and flipped it open. The caller ID revealed the T-888's number. "Yes?" he asked, hoping to hear the good news.

"The house was empty," Baldy's monotonous, emotionless voice answered him. *"Sarah Connor and her associates still have Danny Dyson. They were expecting us; they prepared a trap. Knowles has*

disappeared; he's aware I'm a machine. He could be a threat to the project."

"Shit," Coleman cursed under his breath.

"I've neutralised the remaining members of his team to prevent security leaks. Mobilise the other teams; Knowles has to be found. Immediately."

"Understood," he replied. A second later the phone hung up and the conversation was over. Coleman sighed at the orders he'd been given; he and the others might be the ones running the business, wearing the expensive Italian suits, driving the fancy cars and living in luxury – enjoying all the benefits the past had to offer – but it was the two machines who were really in charge.

"I have matters to attend to," Coleman said to colonel Schiff with a hint of regret; he'd actually looked forward to showing off their machines to the officer, seeing the look on his face as he watched them in action. He decided he'd book himself a front row seat to observe Blue Star instead; where all the top brass and the Defence Secretary would be there to witness the birth of the Skynet Defence System. "I'll leave you with Mr Matthews, here," he gestured to the engineer who'd explained the scissor wings to the colonel. "He'll talk you through all the technical specifications. It's been good seeing you again, colonel."

He hurriedly marched back out of the hangar space and into the complex proper, back through the sterile, windowless corridors and towards the meeting room where he and the other Greys held their conferences. He burst through the door and saw the massive, hulking form of the other machine – a T-800, unlike the bald one – standing there with its arms by its sides facing Coleman as he entered, almost as if expecting him.

"We need to find mobilize all teams," Steroids said as Coleman closed the door behind him. "Sergeant Knowles is a threat; he has to be eliminated."

"You don't need to tell me that," Coleman snapped irritably. The machines could be so dense sometimes. "Sarah Connor's still at large, she still has Danny Dyson, and now Knowles has disappeared: if those three start working together then everything we've worked for these past few years will be in jeopardy. We might have had a better chance of finding them if your little brother hadn't have wiped out the entire team. The agency won't keep providing men if you keep killing them."

The T-800 replied without a moment's hesitation. "Double their contract," it said flatly. "Skynet's monitoring all CCTV cameras in the city; it will find Sarah Connor. Mobilise the other teams to find Knowles: apprehend his family and make him come to us."

Terse silence filled the small living room of the safehouse and five pairs of eyes stared, almost unblinking and in disbelief, at Danny. Sarah shook her head; part denial, part disgust, as everything he'd said sank in. "HK prototypes, mercenaries, and a military contract that's all but signed: *Jesus."* What did they have? Half a dozen of them and the only one she could really depend on was herself. She still didn't trust Cameron, and after leading her son to the future the machine had a long, *long* way to go before she'd ever think about putting any faith in her again. She didn't know this other, adult Savannah, and couldn't make any assumptions about her. Ellison: she'd learnt now to trust him but he wasn't a soldier, and even though he'd handled himself well in the raid on Zeiracorp, that was completely different to storming a Kaliba fortress out in the desert. She figured she could count on Danny even less than she could Cameron – at least the tin miss could fight – and as for John...

She looked at her son as he unselfconsciously pulled off the t-shirt he'd been wearing all this time and took out a clean grey one from the closet. He'd already changed into a pair of cargo pants and slipped some boots on. She could see the changes in John; he was leaner, harder; he looked like he'd been through a war, and his eyes

held a similar wary glint she'd seen in Kyle's: the look of someone who'd lived through hell and come back to tell the tale. She could see it in Savannah, too.

What happened to him? She asked herself, not sure if she wanted to know as she saw a look pass between him and Cameron when the former handed the latter some better suited clothes for her to change into. It was faint but she picked it up; nothing overt, but their eyes met for a fraction of a second longer than was necessary, and a very slight upturning of the lips that was so infinitesimal most people would probably think they imagined it. Something had happened between them in the future and she knew it. She knew her son and knew he'd gone after her for a good reason – at least in his mind – and he wasn't evasive around her like he'd been before.

She wanted to trust John. She had faith in his abilities: he'd survived the future, found Cameron, and made it back with an ally – his capabilities and skills weren't in any doubt at all; he'd clearly proved simply by making it back alive that he was clever, tough and resourceful. But he had one weakness. Cameron. She didn't know yet whether she could count on him. She wanted to.

"Fuck 'em," Savannah shrugged.

"Language," Ellison admonished her, putting his hand on the younger Savannah's shoulder. He knelt down to her and looked squarely into her eyes. "Don't ever say that word, okay," he said, softly but sternly.

"'Kay," Little Savannah nodded. Daddy had never liked swearing anyway.

What shocked Ellison is that the older redhead blushed slightly and looked away at his comment. "Sorry," Savannah said sheepishly.

Was she embarrassed? He wondered. The young woman seemed to have a bit of an attitude, but she'd just complied without hesitation to him, like a naughty child being told off by her parents; he had the

feeling if Sarah had told her off like he had it wouldn't have worked; Savannah's reply would have consisted of two words – the second one being *' o ff.'*

"We've got guns and we've got Cameron," Savannah continued. "We can find the place, storm it and kick the cra-" she stopped midsentence and looked at Ellison and her younger self. "We can stop them," she corrected herself, earning a grateful nod from her future-surrogate-father for not swearing in front of her miniature self.

"We don't know how to find them," John shook his head, disappointed. "We don't have anymore leads."

"There's one," Danny supplied, seeing his chance to be useful. "The helicopter I told you about: I'd recognise it anywhere."

"That's something," John nodded. At the very least, if it came down to it, they could hijack it and force the pilot to fly them there. Though after what Danny said about those HK drones he didn't much like the chances of making it there in one piece.

An idea struck Sarah and her mind flashed back to the night they'd infiltrated Zeiracorp and extracted Danny. She remembered the mercenary she'd knocked out. "Andrew Knowles," she said to Ellison.

"Who?" he looked at her, confused as he tried to recall who that was. He couldn't remember, and wondered what Sarah was thinking. She was so unpredictable – probably why she'd been so hard to catch – that it was hard to keep up with her.

"The merc we beat up," she explained. "He worked for Kaliba; he's gotta exist somewhere, right?"

The former agent smiled. First a slight upturning of the lips, then it grew into a full beam revealing his white teeth as he caught onto what Sarah was getting at. They had a name; they just had to put an ID to it and follow the paper trail.

"I could search for him," Cameron offered.

"We don't have a computer or internet here," Sarah replied. The idea was to stay off the radar, not have postman wandering over with bills. There wasn't even any electricity apart from the gas generator outside.

"I don't need one," Cameron said with a slight smile. She could sift through more data in a second than they could if they sat at a laptop for a year.

"No," John shook his head at her. "If Skynet's up and running, and it hacked into John Henry before, it'll find you," he said to Cameron. "They don't know where we are," he went on. "That's our advantage, for now." Cameron was their ace in the hole; as far as Skynet and Kaliba knew now, John Henry was dead, Weaver was dead. They didn't know that Cameron – as she was now – even existed. From Kaliba's point of view the threat from rival AIs was gone.

"We can't leave a paper trail," Ellison finished off his thoughts. He'd seen plenty of criminals and terrorists do the same over the years; adopt more old fashioned, more secure methods of communication and record keeping; making sure they couldn't be traced.

"How do we do that?" Danny asked.

Ellison looked over to Sarah as an idea – or a person, more accurately – came to mind. "Malenkov," he said. Malenkov always knew everything that was going on, and if he didn't he could find out, quickly and discreetly – for a price, of course.

"Malenkov," Sarah nodded.

Little Savannah stared at Sarah and Ellison in confusion. "What's a Malenkov?"

Chapter 25

A black SUV screamed down the main road and weaved in and out of the mid afternoon traffic, cutting off several cars and earning angry beeps from other motorists in protest at the madman in the car driving like a lunatic. The car approached an intersection as the lights turned red but instead of stopping the driver put a foot down on the gas, accelerating further. Cars passed from left to right and vice versa at the crossroads and the SUV charged straight ahead at speed. They screeched to a halt and skidded, trying to turn away from the idiot surging forwards and ignoring basic common sense. More horns blared angrily at the wacko who seemed to think the Highway Code didn't apply to him.

"Screw you too," Knowles growled at an old lady in a Buick as he roared past her, missing the front of her car by inches. He didn't have time to waste stopping for traffic. Seconds later he was through and pushed the gas down to the floor, pushing the car far above the speed limit.

He pulled out his cell phone and pressed 1 on the speed dial – his wife's number – and pressed *call.* He held the steering wheel with one hand and held the cell to his ear with the other. *"The number you dialled cannot be recognised. Please hang up and try again."*

"Damn it!" Knowles shouted and threw the phone into the passenger footwell in anger. He'd tried half a dozen times since taking off from Ellison's house and each time he'd heard the same message. Thoughts of what might have happened to them ran through his mind; grizzly visions of his smoking home riddled with bullets and blasted apart; his wife and two girls laid out in pools of blood, bullets in their skulls...

Finally he reached his street and leaned forward against the wheel, peering to see his house in the distance. As he got closer he saw it; a detached, three bedroom, ordinary home, with a small but tidy front lawn and a drive at the side with his wife's car still parked up. The doors were closed and all the windows were intact, but he couldn't see any movement inside.

The car swung into the drive and Knowles pushed the door open hard, launched himself out and onto his feet and ran around it to the front door, keeping the keys in the ignition and leaving the engine running. He pushed the front door open and ran through the living room, hearing noise in the kitchen at the back of the house.

"Kate!" he stormed into the kitchen and saw her standing over the oven, stirring a large stainless steel pot. Spices wafted into his nostrils but the smell that would normally have his mouth watering when he came home was completely ignored this time.

Kate, his wife of seventeen years, turned around to see her husband red in the face, wearing black tactical clothes and with a large gun still strapped to him. "What's going on?" she looked at him as if he'd grown a second head. She could see he was afraid, and it made her nervous.

"Oh thank God!" he blurted out, seeing she was alive and well. "I've been trying to call you; I couldn't get through."

Kate slid her cell phone across the kitchen counter towards him. "No signal," she said as he picked it up and saw there were no bars on the little satellite dish icon. "It's been really weird for the last hour or so; what's going on?" she asked him again.

"Where are the girls?" Knowles ignored her.

"Amy's in her room and Melissa's around Simon's house; he's coming over for dinner later."

Simon, Knowles' eyes lit up at the mention of his fifteen year old daughter's boyfriend as an idea took hold. He'd never been fond of Simon; it wasn't his fault, Knowles knew subconsciously: he was a rich kid who'd never done a day's hard graft in his life. He never trusted rich people; they normally got rich by screwing someone over and they passed those same genes on to their kids. Simon seemed nice but that had always made Knowles distrust him more. But he had a car.

"Get Amy, drive round to Simon's and the two of you and Melissa borrow his car; take it down to San Diego and stay with Mike and Jenny for a few days." Mike had been his buddy in the Marines; his squad 2ic and the best man at his and Kate's wedding.

Kate took a step closer to him and eyed her husband with suspicion. "Tell me what's going on," she all but ordered him.

Knowles sighed, knowing he had to tell her something or she wouldn't budge, and her stubbornness wouldn't be any match for what was coming their way. "The contract I took, the one I said seemed too good to be true: it was."

"What have you gotten involved in?" she asked suspiciously, wondering what the hell he was talking about. She'd always been wary of his private security career; she'd been convinced he was going to get himself killed out in Iraq or some other hellhole.

"The firm I'm running security for is up to something," he told her. "I stumbled across something I shouldn't have and now they're coming here. You've gotta go, *now."*

Kate saw the abject fear in his eyes and realised that whatever was going on, he was deadly serious and he wasn't going to take no for an answer. He'd already left the room and gone upstairs, taking three steps at a time as he bounded up to the second floor of their house and into his youngest daughter's bedroom.

"Dad!" Amy protested, turning from the laptop at her desk to confront him. "Haven't you heard of knocking?"

He ignored her and pulled a duffel bag from the top of her wardrobe, opening it to reveal her vast collection of clothes. "Pack your bags," he told her sternly. She stepped forward to challenge him, annoyed at the invasion of her privacy, but he was having none of it. "Amy, if you don't pack this bag then *I* will; and you know what my fashion sense is like."

Amy snatched the bag from his grasp and started to pull tops and jeans off of hangars and stuff them inside. *"Fine,"* she rolled her eyes, exasperated. No way was she going to let her dad pack her clothes for her; he was the worst dressed guy in the world. Knowles heard his wife coming up the stairs and turned to her. "You pack too," he told her. "We're out of this house in two minutes."

Kate nodded nervously and disappeared into their bedroom to pack, and Amy pulled her cell charger from the wall socket. She took her laptop from the desk and started to insert that into her bag as well. Knowles quickly grabbed it, pulled it out and put it back on the desk.

"Dad," she moaned, "I can't go without my computer."

"Yes you can," he said absently. "I never had a laptop as a kid and I turned out fine." He didn't know much about AIs but he reckoned they could probably track their movements, cell phone conversation and even internet use. Kaliba was plugged into everything, from what he'd seen, and he wasn't going to give them any avenue to exploit. He saw the square bulge in Amy's jeans pocket and realised something else could give them away, too. "And the iPhone," he held his hand out.

She shook her head adamantly this time, digging her heels in. "No way," she said. "I can't *live* without it; how am I meant to call my friends?"

"You don't. You can't live without it? You'll die *with* it," he snapped. They didn't have time for this crap. "Phone. Now."

"You suck, Dad," Amy grumbled under her breath as she reluctantly handed over the phone to her dad.

"Yeah, yeah," he rolled his eyes. At least she'd be alive to not like him, he thought. "I'll buy you a Kindle if you just do what I say." As a father of two teenage girls, he knew full well that bribery was often the most effective way to get their cooperation. He rarely ever used it but this was an emergency.

Amy noticed the assault rifle strapped to her dad's chest and swallowed nervously. "Dad, why have you got a gun?"

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Go pack a bag for your sister; you've got two minutes." He left the room and went into his bedroom, where his wife was finishing packing a bag. Only a small one, he noticed; she knew he wasn't going with them.

He pulled out a metal lock box from inside a dresser drawer and turned the key already in it. Inside was a snub nosed .38 revolver, already loaded and with a box of spare rounds. He pulled the gun out, reached for Kate's hand and pressed the weapon into her palm. "Take this," he said gently as he handed it to her. She tried to push it away but he held it fast to her. "Just in case. Get down to Mike and Jenny and stay for a couple days. Don't call anyone, and I mean *anyone.* "

"Are you gonna tell me what's going on?" Kate asked as she finally took the pistol, slipped it into her bag before zipping it up, and putting the case over her shoulder as she carried it out of her room and through the landing, down the stairs where Amy was already waiting with her own bag and one for Melissa – whether it was her favourite clothes or ones his eldest daughter wouldn't be seen dead in, depended entirely on Amy's mood and how well they were getting along. He'd been working so long on the Kaliba job he hadn't seen them in two weeks, so he had no idea.

He pulled Kate close to him as Amy got into the passenger seat of the family car. "I promise I'll tell you when it's over," he said softly to her. He leaned in to kiss her but she turned away, supremely pissed off, and she ducked into the car and closed the door. The window was still open and he leaned into it, meeting her eyes for a moment. "When you get to Simon's, do whatever it takes to get his car. Bribe him if you have to, and leave this one with him. Don't tell him or anyone else where you're going. Get down to Mike and Jenny's and don't get out of the car until you do. I'll call you when it's safe."

"You better tell me what this is about later," she said angrily as she backed the car out of the drive and rolled away, quickly disappearing around the corner and onto the main road. Knowles felt a pain in his chest watching them leave, knowing he might never see them again. He couldn't risk them, though. Their best bet was to get well away from him and keep hidden. He'd have to check in with Mike later on and let him know Kate and the girls were on their way. Until then he had to figure out his next move.

Sarah pushed her sunglasses further up her nose to block out the glaring sunlight, and adjusted the peaked cap for the hundredth time as she carefully watched people passing by outside their car, watching for the merc she'd seen before and scrutinising everyone she could for any signs they recognised her. They'd driven from the safehouse, through the desert and back into the bloated urban sprawl of LA County, further west into the tiny Oxnard Airport, following the directions Danny had given them. The airport wasn't busy but there were enough people there to make her distinctly uncomfortable. She looked across to John, in the driver's seat, and wondered how he could seem so calm and collected.

"Relax, mom," he said, noticing how tense she was. Even more than usual; she'd reached for her Glock a couple of time when people looked for even a fraction of a second too long. A security guard had tapped on the window at one point and she'd nearly jumped through

the roof. It had taken her a supreme act of will not to pull out the gun. Luckily enough he'd had no idea who they were and had only wanted to tell them to move out of the handicapped parking zone.

"How am I meant to relax with Kaliba and the feds after us?" she asked. She spotted a security camera bearing down on them, attached to a lamppost and watching the car park. "Goddamn September 11th," she muttered. From what she'd read about the subject practically every airport in the world had beefed up security and surveillance since then. It made life more and more difficult for them to operate, and she ached to get back to the isolation of the desert; away from any cameras, cops, or people in general.

"After being hunted by HKs and endos the feds are nothing," John tapped his fingers against the wheel.

"Guess so," Sarah shrugged. She looked out of the windshield and saw the helicopters in the distance on the far side of the runway, over half a mile away and barely visible; they couldn't make out any details at least, and the small propeller driven planes taxiing for takeoff kept getting in the way. She couldn't see any signs of the silver helicopter Danny had told them about. Was he luring them into a trap, or sending them on a wide goose chase?

She watched John staring outside at the airport runway, his attention not wavering for a second as he scanned it like a hawk. She didn't know what to say to him; she had so many questions about the future but she wasn't sure if he'd really want to talk about it; a lot of soldiers she'd met had been reluctant to talk about their experiences in war, and what he'd just been through could be described as no less than the worst war ever fought in human history.

"How'd you meet Savannah?" She asked, deciding to start off with something smaller.

"She found me," John said to her. "Her and Ellison; they'd waited years for me, just to get me back here. I never would have found Cameron without them – I wouldn't have even made it without them."

He'd felt alone for so long now but he'd realised in the future he couldn't do it all on his own. Nobody could survive this alone.

"How?" Sarah asked, now her interest was piqued.

"You buried Cameron and he knew where; he led me there and we dug her up with the guns – thanks," he smiled gratefully at her. "I needed those weapons," more than she could ever have anticipated, he thought. "We used up every last bullet."

There was another question on the tip of Sarah's tongue but she wasn't sure if she really wanted to know the answer. She hesitated for a moment before deciding to push on and ask anyway. "Where was I in all this?"

John swallowed sadly and his face fell a fraction of an inch. He looked down at the dashboard and clenched his jaw as his whole face tightened uncomfortably, recalling Ellison's story about how his mom had died. It hasn't happened yet, he reminded himself. "You... didn't make it," he said.

Sarah looked away awkwardly for a moment, not sure what to say to that. She'd figured from the look on his face even before he spoke that she must have died. "How?" she asked, dreading the answers after all the worries and tests she'd had done lately. One word rang through her mind, even more inexorable than Skynet and the looming Judgement Day.

"Kaliba attacked Ellison's house; you held them off so Ellison and Savannah could escape."

Strangely, morbidly, a sense of relief swept over Sarah at hearing that. She'd gone down fighting; she'd been killed by Kaliba's goons. That wasn't so bad, she thought. "At least it wasn't cancer," she shrugged. She'd hated the idea of dying from cancer ever since Cameron told her about it; it was one thing to eat a bullet trying to stop the machines from taking over the world, that wasn't so bad – it'd be quick and at least she'd have given it her all. But having some

insidious... *thing* growing inside you, totally malevolent, eating you away slowly from the inside: not how she wanted to meet her maker.

'Cancer'... that one word resounded in john's head and bounced around his skull like a pinball. He recalled exactly what Cameron had told him in the motel before they'd both gone through time. *'She's lost eleven percent of her body mass...'*

"Mom, are you sick?" John asked, feeling himself turn a shade paler. He'd come back in time to save her from being killed by Kaliba: had he just traded a quick death on her feet for a slow, agonising one? The thought that he might not have changed anything, that he couldn't save her, sent an icy chill down his spine and tightened his chest. He felt slightly sick at the thought of it.

"I'm fine," Sarah replied quickly, looking forward as a twin engine Cessna took off into the sky.

John knew his mom well enough to know when to back off, so he decided not to push it further. He looked out but still couldn't see any sign of a silver helicopter. It didn't help that the airport terminal blocked much of their view of the other side of the runway, and half of the helicopter landing pads were obscured. He opened the door and stepped outside into the bright sunshine, taking out a pair of large black binoculars with him.

"What're you doing?" Sarah looked around nervously. "People are going to see us." The airport wasn't exactly heaving but there were still enough people around – and security cameras – to make her uncomfortable about getting out of the car.

"We'll be fine," John said. He realised that at some point in the past they'd fallen back and started being defensive; reacting to protect people on the blood wall, keeping hidden from Cromartie, and generally having no idea on their next move. That had to change; now he was running the show, not his mom, and they were going on the attack. That meant taking risks but so be it.

He shut the door, adjusted his own shades and baseball cap – knowing very well how to disguise his face from the public and from security cameras. He kept his head level and didn't look up at the CCTV. According to Danny, Skynet was active: it was online and it had a thirst for knowledge and information. If it was anything like John Henry it was probably sifting through terabytes of information online, and seeing as it already seemed to be trying to hunt him down – judging from all the mercenaries who'd attacked them before and killed Charley – chances were it was monitoring CCTV cameras throughout the region, so he still had to be careful.

Sarah hurriedly followed after him, and joined John at the other end of the parking lot. As she caught up with him she realised that things had changed and now suddenly she wasn't calling the shots anymore. She didn't know what to think about that; she was so used to being in charge, and being the only person she could depend on, that on the one hand it made her uncomfortable. A selfish part, deep down inside her also felt relieved that someone else had now taken the burden from her, though she chided herself that that person was her son, the very person she'd wanted to avoid putting all this on. She was also worried about him leading when Cameron could influence him, but she realised as he led them across the grass verge and past the terminal building that he'd taken the decision squarely out of her hands.

They walked around the side of the airport terminal; it was only a small facility, built to handle light domestic flights only, so it didn't take them long to make their way around the building. The runways themselves were on the other side of a twelve foot chain link fence, with curls of razor wire on top. Even though it was only a very minor airport they still took security seriously.

Eventually they cleared the terminal building and walked around the perimeter fence. John stopped and put the binoculars to his face and looked towards the helicopters out on the field, glancing from one to the next as he searched for a silver chopper.

"Aren't we going to look suspicious?" Sarah asked, gesturing to the field glasses. John put them down for a moment and looked around.

"Not really," he said, pointing to three guys in their early twenties, a hundred yards or so away from them doing the exact same thing. He looked around and saw several plane spotters, all with binos, all looking up at the sky or at the aircraft on the strips. They were just two more people who blended in with the crowd of enthusiasts. John couldn't see the appeal of standing around at an airport for hours looking at planes, but it made good cover. He just hoped nobody came and asked him questions about aircraft as he didn't have the slightest clue.

He looked through the binoculars again and swept them slowly to the right. There wasn't a single silver helicopter landed on the field. He sighed, disappointed. It had been a long shot; chances were even if Danny was telling them the truth that the odds of it being there when they were would be slight.

A rotary engine whirred up in the sky and John moved the binos up, catching a flicker of movement in the upper limits of his view through the lenses; a faint dot approaching in the air. It grew closer until they could both hear the whirring of its blades, and John got a good look at the aircraft as it hovered over the field and descended towards the grassy field enclosed within the fence.

"It's silver," John commented, his lips pursed into a tight smile and he felt the kind of tense anticipation he'd had before in the future when he'd been waiting to ambush a terminator and saw something approaching. He felt like a predator that had just caught the scent of dangerous prey.

He was aware that Sarah couldn't see too well but that didn't matter; only one of them needed to have eyes on the helicopter as it landed. This could still be a wild goose chase, he thought. The aircraft was unmarked, which in itself aroused suspicion. Every other bird in the airport – plane or helicopter – had a serial number on the tail or the

wings. This one was completely blank. *The FAA would probably have a thing or two to say about that,* he thought.

The helicopter lowered down until it landed and the blades started to slow. A side door slid open moments after it touched down and seven men stepped out, wearing jeans, sunglasses, and a variety of jackets, despite the punishing California heat – *or is that just me, still?* John wondered. He knew it'd take time to get acclimatised to pre J-Day California but even so...

"Is it hot or is it just me?" John asked his mom. He turned to her and saw beads of sweat around her temples and her neck.

"Boiling," Sarah answered. She was too focused on the helicopter – despite not being able to make out any details without binos – to worry about wiping sweat off or trying to cool herself.

"Makes sense," John nodded grimly. He took notice of the jackets they were wearing; two leather, one denim, and the rest were something else – not what he'd be wearing in this heat. They weren't wearing them to keep warm; they were wearing them to hide something. "They're armed," he said. He watched as the last two men out of the chopper pulled long black bags out with them. The men filed away from the helicopter and walked across the airfield.

John put the binoculars down and turned to face his mom. "Danny was right," he said to her, "Silver helicopter, just like he said, and half a dozen guys I'd bet anything are mercenaries."

"That puts Danny at notch one," Sarah said harshly. She still didn't trust the spoilt little brat and probably never would.

John said nothing, sharing at least some of his mother's sentiment. He didn't trust Danny either, yet. The difference between him and his mom however was that he could actually be reached, it was possible for Danny to prove himself to him if he really wanted to; chances are it would take Danny to die helping them – like his father – before Sarah would be swayed.

"Heads up," Sarah said as the seven mercenaries marched out of the airport perimeter and into the parking lot, only a few metres away from them. John handed his mom the binoculars and watched the men from the corner of his eye whilst pointing up into the air at a plane coming in to land and pretending to be interested. The men passed by behind him, laughing, joking and chatting to themselves like a group of guys out on a stag party, and John looked back to his right as they headed towards a pair of black SUVs. He caught a good look at the bags two of the men were carrying; they looked heavy from the way the men were heaving them, and judging from the length and width of them he figured they held the team's assault weapons. The airport was so tiny, handling mostly propeller-driven airplanes and some helicopters, that it probably didn't even have a security desk.

They all had short hair and looked lean and muscular; they were mercenaries all right, John thought. They had *ex military* written all over them. He felt sorry for the poor bastards; they, like Danny, didn't even know they were bringing about the end of the world. He reckoned none of the engineers he'd mentioned knew about it either.

"They didn't recognise us," Sarah noted with satisfaction. They'd just walked right on by. Of course, her hair was blonde, they were both wearing hats and shades, and these guys wouldn't exactly be expecting to see their targets – assuming they were their targets – the moment they landed. They probably wouldn't even be on the job until they got changed into tactical gear and armed themselves.

"That's the recon sorted," John said as he turned and headed back to their Lexus and got into the driver's seat. Sarah joined him a moment later. He watched and waited as the mercenaries in their SUVs left the parking lot and joined onto the main road. He gave it a few minutes before he started it up and pulled out of the bay, drove out of the lot and onto the same road the Kaliba goons had taken before, but in the opposite direction from them.

"We're not following them?" Sarah asked. "What about declaring war on Kaliba?"

"Doesn't mean we go in guns blazing," John said evenly as he took the next right. It would have been tempting to have gone after them, found out where they were going and set up an ambush; whittle down their numbers a bit and make Kaliba more manageable, but those were his mom's kind of tactics, and as much as he loved her, as great a fighter she was, it hadn't worked out too well so far.

John had no intention of following them; he didn't need to know where they were going, and if they were going after them then the last place he wanted to be was up their asses keeping an eye on them; he'd seen in the future how in the blink of an eye the hunters could become the hunted. This was his war and he was going to fight smart. They had their first intelligence confirmed and they now had a *slight* lead to Kaliba. The pilot would know exactly where their base was. "Let's see what Ellison comes up with," he said as he took the next road heading east, taking them towards the highway that ran north of Los Angeles. He didn't want to enter the sprawling metropolis and was more than happy to keep to the sparser surrounding areas.

"When this is all over I want to leave LA," John said. "It's too crowded; too many bad memories here."

"Memories don't leave you," Sarah told him. "Doesn't matter where you go." She knew that all too well; the memories of Kyle stuck with her, and even leaving LA, years later she'd recalled sights, feelings, and even smells that reminded her of their time together. Every other man she'd slept with, except for maybe Charley, in her mind's eye she'd pictured Kyle instead.

"We can start over," he said, "live our lives again."

The idea appealed to Sarah, she had to admit. She pursed her lips and looked out the window at the scenery whipping by as she tried to imagine her life if they stopped it. She couldn't picture it, though. "It'll be the same as before," she said sadly. "On the run from the law, always looking over our shoulders, and always wondering if we've really stopped it."

"That's where you're wrong," John shook his head, a sly smile parting his lips. "Cameron can take care of that."

"How?" she asked, not sure if she liked the idea of leaving her future life and freedom in the hands of an all too glitchy cyborg.

"Cameron merged with John Henry in the future; they're the same person now, and Weaver gave Cameron... upgrades. She'll know if the FBI are onto us, she'll know if there's another Skynet. If it happens again she can nip it in the bud before it starts."

"I don't trust her," Sarah said simply, laying her cards out on the table in full. "How am I supposed to when she tried to kill you and took you away?"

"She didn't. I chose to go. I didn't have to follow, but I made the choice. I went through hell to find her but I'd do it again in a heartbeat if I had to. You know why." John stopped for a moment and saw his mom's jaw clench, her face tightened and she was clearly wrestling with the implications of what he'd just said. "I trust her, mom. I'm asking you to do the same."

Sarah sat in silence as myriad thoughts ran through her head. She saw a flash of John when he was twelve, convincing her not to smash the other machine's chip, the flashes of leadership that had briefly emerged back then. It was more now; he clearly wasn't a kid anymore. *What happened between them in the future?* She asked herself. What had happened to make her son trust the machine so much, to care about it enough to risk his life jumping through to an unknown, dangerous future like that? She knew her son, though; he wouldn't budge on this. He'd defended Cameron before and she realised he always would. Constantly suspecting Cameron or trying to get John away from her would only drive a rift between her and her son, when she'd only just gotten him back. She wasn't going to risk losing him again.

"I'll play it your way," she finally said. "I'll lay off her." *For now,* she thought. The machine had one chance and that was it; if it blew it

then she'd be ready and waiting with the thermite.

"I missed you, mom," John smiled happily, turning to her for a brief second before setting his eyes back on the road.

"You too," she replied. "What was it like in the future?" She remembered every word Kyle had told her about it, but imagining it wasn't the same.

John's smile faded at the haunting memories that would be with him for the rest of his life. He hadn't yet had any nightmares about it but he knew they'd start sometime soon and then they'd never go away. "Hell," he summed up in one word. He decided not to tell her that in the first few days he'd been captured, barely escaped alive, been beaten up, robbed and left for dead. Nor that Kyle had hooked up with Allison; he didn't think she'd want to hear about that. "If it hadn't been for Savannah and Ellison I never would have survived." And if it hadn't been for Ellison and his mom, he realised he never would have gotten Cameron back. "Thank you," he leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"What for?" she asked, genuinely confused now.

"For not burning Cameron," John said. "For the guns, the clothes... for everything."

For the first time in a long time, Sarah genuinely smiled. She had her son back, and soon all would be right with the world.

Ellison and Savannah were led through the dingy, unused industrial complex by two burly, leather clad heavies with dark hair, pale skin despite the California sun, and both with cigarettes clamped between their lips. The sun was shining brightly but it didn't make the place seem any more cheerful. Abandoned factories and warehouses lined the area and created a maze that would be easy to get lost in.

Before leaving the desert safehouse Savannah had changed into some of Cameron's spare clothes that had been packed there a long time ago; dark grey combats that were a little too long in the leg, a black t-shirt, and boots that fit comfortably – by stroke of luck it had turned out they were both the same shoe size. She felt a lot more comfortable now, in better clothes than skirt and sandals; it might be what a lot of people liked, but not her. She'd pick function over fashion, any day.

"This place creeps me out," Savannah said quietly to Ellison.

"It's just a little run down," he replied. He knew that Malenkov liked to keep his business away from his upscale home in Beverley Hills. He actually lived in a gated community there, in a house that Ellison couldn't have afforded in two lifetimes on his Zeiracorp salary. Sasha Malenkov had greased the right wheels with the US Government, all right. Uncle Sam had made him extremely wealthy.

"It's not that; in the future this place is a Skynet repair facility." She remembered when the pair of them had travelled to LA in the future, to wait for John. They'd spotted this place on their journey and had almost been spotted by patrolling Centaurs as they'd tried to slip past it. She looked at the younger version of her surrogate father and thought back to how he'd looked after her back then. Despite her skill and knack for survival it had been his cool head that had kept them alive and her from going off the deep end. The amount of times when she'd wanted to just open up on a machine and he'd talked her out of it – saving her life in the process – was too many to even count.

The two heavies led them into the same warehouse as they'd led Ellison and Sarah before, through to the vast, cavernous interior. Their footsteps echoed slightly in the large, empty open space.

"Weapons?" The shorter one – the uglier of the two – looked at them expectantly. Ellison opened his jacket – a beige lightweight one he'd taken from his own house after changing into more suitable clothing

than the usual suit and tie – and pulled out a Glock 17 from a pancake holster within.

"And you?" the taller one stared at Savannah. She handed over a Sig Sauer but the two men weren't satisfied; one at a time they frisked them, taking slightly longer to do Savannah than Ellison, much to her irritation. He pulled out a combat knife that she'd taken from the stores underneath the safehouse's floorboards and stuffed it into his jacket pocket.

"He is inside," the taller of the two told them. "Waiting for you." Savannah caught the shorter one leering at her and make no attempt to disguise his lecherous stares.

"Maybe when you're finished with Mister Malenkov, we can have some fun," he winked at Savannah and smiled. She managed, barely, to stop herself from shuddering at the thought of his suggestion. He was no different from the men she'd whored herself out to for drugs and booze when she'd gone off the rails: fuck-ugly old men, unable to attract a woman using their looks or personalities, who'd happily taken advantage of a vulnerable teenage girl who'd needed help. He disgusted her.

"Maybe not," she glared icily at him. He grinned again, reached out and brushed his hand against her ass. Savannah instantly whirled around and threw a vicious punch into the goon's face, smashing his nose in a shower of blood and dropping the man to the ground, reaching into her hair with her free hand at the same instant in almost a blur of movement. She saw the other heavy reaching for his gun and she pulled the vegetable knife out from under her long hair. She thrust it forward as the barrel of his pistol pressed against her cheek, and she held the blade against the man's throat. He stared at her with a mixture of contempt and surprise; how the hell had a woman like this managed to hide a knife from them, and on top of it all, bring it out so fast the first he'd seen it was when it was pressed against his throat?

"I should blow your head off," the man spat out, flecks of spittle spraying Savannah's face, joining the reeking smell of fried food and cigarettes that assaulted her nose.

"You could do that, but you'll just die slower than me," she commented, glaring at him with mutual hatred. The shorter man got back up, drew his gun and pointed it at the back of her head. Ellison could do nothing but watch as the three of them were locked into a Mexican standoff.

"Drop the knife," the shorter one with a now broken nose snapped.

"Let them come," Malenkov's voice boomed from the open doors of the shipping crate. He stepped towards them and surveyed the scene before him. On his order, the two heavies lowered their weapons and pocketed them. Savannah hesitated for a moment before she too withdrew her blade, albeit reluctantly, and handed it to the taller one.

"I'm sorry," Malenkov said amicably, gesturing for the pair of them to follow him into the container. They entered and sat down at the wooden seats in front of the desk whilst the arms dealer himself took the leather seat behind it and leaned back. The two guards stood outside; the taller one helping the other with his bloodied and broken nose.

Savannah's eyes opened wide at the sight of the weapons on racks and shelves that lined the walls of the container. Assault rifles, shotguns, pistols, grenade launchers... there was even a Browning M2 .50 cal along the back wall, behind Malenkov, just above a minigun mounted like a trophy below it. The place was virtually an armoury; this guy's better tooled up than some army bases, she thought. Now she could see why Sarah had come here, and probably had to endure the same two insufferable goons outside as well.

"It's nice to see you again, James," he smiled at Ellison. He turned to Savannah and extended his perfectly manicured hand. "I don't

believe we've met," he said to her, a slight smile on his face, but not the lecherous grins the other two had worn.

"Savannah," she replied curtly, not bothering to take his hand. This guy might be someone to some people, but not to her.

"Lovely to meet you," Malenkov smiled politely as he withdrew his hand. If he was bothered about her not shaking his hand he didn't show it. He turned to Ellison with a quizzical look. "I was not expecting to see you so soon, James; you haven't used all the weapons I sold you already?" He hadn't heard of any small wars being fought anywhere, and he knew Ellison wouldn't sell the weapons himself; he was too straight an arrow to enter his world. He would love to know what the man had used the weaponry for but one of the key requirements for arms trading was discretion: it was best not to ask questions he didn't really need to know the answers to. Idle curiosity had ruined deals and cost the lives of many men he'd known in his world.

Ellison shook his head slowly. "No; we don't need anymore guns, Sasha."

"Then, if I may ask; what are you here for?"

Savannah leaned forward and decided to get straight to the point. "We need information," she said. "Ellison says you're well connected."

Malenkov leaned back in his chair and looked at the red haired young lady. She was abrupt, straight to the point – bordering on rude – and he liked that. She spoke her mind, and that was something he wasn't used to. He wished more people did; he often had to deal with yes men and unfounded pleasantries when he just wanted to get down to business.

He leaned forward and brought his hands together, his interest piqued. "And what information do you require?" he asked.

"About a man," Ellison replied. "Andrew Knowles: a mercenary; mid forties, dark hair and living in LA. We think he's ex military. He's working for a company called Kaliba."

The Ukrainian took a pen from his desk and jotted down notes onto a small sheet of paper. Andrew Knowles... is there anything I should know?" he asked. "You have friends still at the FBI; are they unable to help you?"

Ellison hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to tell him. He wouldn't believe them if he told them the truth again, he hadn't done so last time but he'd still been happy to do business with them. "I have reason to believe it's not safe to contact them," he said. Ever since 9/11 there was software in place to monitor communications and filter through for certain words or phrases that could be linked to terrorist plots. He had to assume that Skynet had a similar ability and would be searching for any mention of itself, Kaliba, or even Knowles. It might be extreme but he had to play it safe and assume the absolute worst case scenario. "The people we're after – Kaliba – might be monitoring our communication, but they won't suspect you." That much was true; he hadn't *officially* dealt with Malenkov in two years; the Ukrainian should be a safe bet.

"What do I get from this arrangement, if I agree?"

That caused a pause for both Ellison and Savannah; the pair of them both knew they didn't have any real funds anymore. No cash and no assets; they were essentially living off what they could scavenge.

Malenkov noticed their hesitation and realised that Ellison must be desperate indeed. He turned to Savannah and looked her up and down. She was young, fit, very attractive, and intelligent, from what he could make out. "I'll do this as a favour to you, James," he said. He looked at Savannah again for a moment. "Young lady, you're clearly a woman of great skill; defeating my guards like you did. How would you like to work for me?"

"No thanks," she said without a moment's hesitation.

"Don't be so hasty," Malenkov said generously. "You'll make good money; more than you ever dreamed about."

"I don't need money," she replied simply. After living in the future money had only been good for burning to get some heat or to cook food, or in the case of coins, melting down and turning into shrapnel. She remembered constructing claymore mines in the future using plastic ice cream tubs, homemade plastic explosive and a bag of bullion they'd taken from a bank. Ironic to the world now, money had become the least sought after commodity after J-Day.

"Don't decide now," Malenkov said with a smile on his face, as if he hadn't heard her decline his offer. "Think about it, and make up your mind later." Unlike his crude bodyguards, he didn't see the young woman – attractive as she was – as a piece of meat, but he'd only seen a glimpse of her skill with the blade – both concealing it and deploying it so quickly his men had been taken completely off guard – and realised she would make an excellent edition to his enterprise.

"I'll do this for you, James. In return, you'll owe me a favour. Of my choosing; when, where and what I wish. Agreed?"

Ellison thought about it and found himself stricken with indecision: they needed information on Knowles, and whatever could lead them to Kaliba from him – and they needed it with minimal risk to themselves – but the idea of being indebted to Malenkov worried him deeply. Did he really want to end up in the employ of an international arms dealer – sanctioned by the CIA or not? He didn't really want to go down that road.

"I'll take the favour," Savannah volunteered herself. "One job; and it better not involve sex."

Malenkov held his hands up in front of him in protest. "I'd never suggest such a thing," he said reassuringly. Nothing like that, but I name the job; when and where," he told her. He had a few ideas in mind; ways he could utilise her skills. She wouldn't come to work for

him, but if he had her just as a one off then he would have to choose carefully.

"Done," Savannah nodded curtly to him. If it meant taking out Skynet and stopping all this then she'd do it; she just hoped it wouldn't come back to haunt her later.

Malenkov pulled out a cell phone from a drawer in his desk and placed it on the wooden worktop, sliding it across to Ellison. "Take this," he said. "It's a pay and go cell with fifty dollars' credit; only I know the number. I'll call you when I have something." He nodded at them and the two took that as their cue to leave. Ellison led the way out and the taller of the two guards gave them their weapons back. The shorter one was nowhere to be seen, and Savannah guessed he was trying to fix up his broken nose. She smirked slightly as the remaining goon shoved her pistol and knife into her hands and watched her warily, clearly hating her but at the same time not wanting to piss her off.

"One last thing," Ellison turned to Malenkov as he put his pistol back into its holster. The Ukrainian looked up at him, listening intently to whatever the man had to say. "These people, Kaliba: they don't mess around – they flew a prototype drone into a building to kill Catherine Weaver."

"Zieracorp," Malenkov nodded knowingly. "I heard about that; the official report says a Cessna lost control and crashed into the tower."

"I was in the tower – in same the room it crashed into: it wasn't a Cessna. The *official report* isn't exactly what you'd call accurate," Ellison countered. Either Kaliba had cleaned up after themselves or they'd bribed, blackmailed or threatened someone into falsifying the report to cover it all up.

Malenkov smirked at him. "That's usually the case."

The sun shone brightly and its rays beat down on the small safehouse in the desert. All the windows were open but it didn't stop the temperature from climbing up into punishing levels. Three occupants were still inside, roasting as if they were in an oven.

Inside the main room, the couch had been pushed back against the wall and the floorboards underneath had been extracted, propped up against one corner of the room. From the hole in the floor Cameron extracted a pair of AK-47s, placed them onto the ground next to her, and reached in again to pull out white boxes marked *7.62x39mm, 100 rounds.* She took out a cleaning kit from under the floorboards, quickly disassembled the AKs and started the monotonous process of oiling and cleaning the weapons.

Sweat dripped from her temples, her neck, and armpits, and stained the t-shirt she was wearing. Droplets ran into her eyes and without conscious thought she blinked them away; the action had been designed by Skynet to be dual purpose: both to appear more human but also because any blockage to the eyes could also obscure a terminator's vision just as it did with people. Other than the blinking, however, she showed no sign of distress from the heat as she worked.

"Aren't you hot?" Little Savannah asked, sat on the couch and watching every move Cameron made. She wiped the sweat off her own brow and wiped it on her dress. It was too hot and sticky, and they didn't have any clothes to fit her, so she'd had to wear the same things for days and she didn't like it.

"No," Cameron replied simply. Technically it wasn't true; she could feel the heat but it didn't bother her. But it would be easier to tell Savannah she wasn't hot.

"Can you feel heat?" Savannah asked her. "The basement at mommy's work was cold but John Henry never put on a sweater. Are you like him?"

"Yes," Cameron smiled slightly as she answered. "I'm like John Henry."

"But there's no cord in your head," the young redhead looked at her inquisitively. Cameron stared back at her and her face softened slightly. Did Savannah know she was a machine? Had she known John Henry was a machine, or did she think he was a strange human who lived in the basement and had a fibre optic cable connected into his skull?

"I don't need a cord," Cameron said. "You know what I am?"

"You're a robot, like John Henry."

"Cyborg," Cameron corrected her.

Savannah just stared at her, confused. "What's a cyborg?"

Cameron considered what to tell her: a full technical description would probably confuse her. "Like a robot," she settled with, "but more advanced."

Now Savannah was interested. She looked up at Cameron as she threaded a cloth attached to a length of string through the rifle's barrel. "Can you do anything cool?" she asked. "John Henry made the lights go funny."

"How about this?" Cameron asked. She made her eyes glow bright blue beneath the organic orbs and Savannah's face beamed even brighter. She returned the smile, finding herself glad that the younger Savannah was happier. She'd spent much of the past day and a half in her room, crying. Seeing her upset had disturbed Cameron, and she'd wanted to distract her from her pain. She was surprised that she felt empathy towards someone who wasn't John; she knew it was a remnant of John Henry, but it was now part of her and as such she felt his concern for her.

"Or this?" Cameron spoke in Ellison's voice.

"Can you do Sarah?" Savannah asked.

It took a fraction of a second for Cameron to adjust her vocal synthesisers to match the exact tone and resonance of Sarah's voice. "No one is ever safe," she said, impersonating John's mother perfectly. "Do your homework. Go clean your room. I'll make pancakes." Savannah lay back on the couch and erupted into a fit of giggles at the impression.

"She only ever made pancakes," she recounted. The only time she'd eaten anything different since living with Sarah was when they'd eaten Chinese takeout a few nights ago. "Sarah's a bad cook," Cameron said, her voice returning to normal.

A moment's silence passed between them. Cameron reassembled the first gun, satisfied it was sufficiently clean, and started to work on the second. The AK-47 was able to operate even when it hadn't been cleaned for protracted periods of time, but she wasn't willing to take chances. Not with John's life and the future at stake. Savannah watched her work, but there was something she was confused about.

"How did you get out?" she asked. "Sarah buried you. Did John wake you up?"

Cameron interpreted what she was saying for a moment and nodded. "John woke me up," she confirmed.

"Did he kiss you, like in Sleeping Beauty? Sarah said he better not have."

The cyborg's lips parted into a sly smile, revealing her perfect white teeth. "There was kissing," she winked conspiratorially. "Don't tell Sarah." She knew John's mother would have to find out eventually but she also knew John, and knew he'd want to tell her himself.

"I won't," she shook her head. "Cross my heart." She looked at the rifles and the boxes Cameron was working on and slid off the sofa,

onto the floor next to the brunette. "Can I help?" she asked. "I'm bored." Cameron pushed half a dozen magazines towards her and two boxes of ammunition. She opened one box and tipped the rounds out onto the floor, then held up one of the black metal magazines in front of Savannah, and a single bullet. She pushed the round into the top of the magazine with a metallic click.

"Fill these with bullets," Cameron instructed her. "Thirty to a magazine." Savannah nodded and started to slowly slot bullets into place, pushing them down and smiling again, glad to be helpful.

"Like this?" she asked as she pushed a round inside.

"Yes."

"You'll need more than that against Kaliba," Danny stood in the doorway, holding a plastic bottle of water in his hand, and sweating just as much as Cameron and Savannah. He'd watched the cyborg and the little girl together, fixing the guns, and he couldn't help but laugh on the inside. These people had no clue what they were dealing with. "You can't do anything against them; we need to call the police, or the army or something. Marines, air force..."

Cameron and Savannah stared at him as he leaned against the doorframe. He'd interrupted their conversation when they'd both been enjoying each others company. "They won't believe you," Cameron said to him. "They'll try to arrest us if we told the police, or Kaliba would attack us."

"We've gotta *try,"* Danny protested. "Kaliba's got its own private army, unmanned drones controlled by an AI; and what've we got? A few guns. We don't even have a plan, do we?" There was no way they could fight Kaliba, no matter what they thought. And the truth was he just wanted to go home. This was all too much for him; he wasn't a spy or a soldier or anything; they didn't need him. "Call the FBI; tell them they're supplying terrorists or something. Make it an anonymous call, even. Let *them* deal with it."

Savannah looked at Danny and then at the ground, her and Cameron's fun effectively shot down by him. Cameron stared at Danny and got up to her feet. "We don't know where Kaliba are," she reminded him sternly. *"Honestly, I never knew where we went: they picked us up and an airfield and flew us in a helicopter. Blacked out – no windows in the back or anything; took us out to the middle of nowhere, a mountain range somewhere."*

It was strange, Danny thought, hearing his own words repeated to him in his own voice, by the cyborg. He still wondered what the hell she really was capable of.

"I never said you could leave your room," Cameron added, her eyes glowing angrily as she glared at him.

"So I'm still a prisoner?" Danny asked irritably, fighting down his nervousness for a moment. He stepped back as Cameron moved closer to him, anger giving way to fear. She freaked him the hell out. "I mean... I told you the truth..."

"We haven't verified that yet," she replied quickly.

"And when you do?"

"It's John's decision," Cameron said. "You're safer with us."

At that, Danny rolled his eyes and snorted. "Not likely," he muttered.

"Go back to your room," Cameron ordered as she stepped forward, closing the gap between them. She could tell Danny was afraid of her, and she decided to use it to her advantage. "Don't come out unless I tell you to. Don't try to escape: I'll hear you. Understand?"

Danny stared back at her for a moment before deciding it was in his best interest to do as she said. As frightened by Sarah, John, and everything that had happened recently, Cameron was the worst by far. "Yes," he replied meekly. He turned and went back to the room,

or the cell, he'd been assigned to, resigned to being kept under house arrest.

"I don't like him," Savannah said as she loaded the last bullet into the magazine, holding it up to Cameron for inspection. She took it and pushed the top round down, satisfied it was in properly. She smiled at the girl and earned a beaming grin back.

"I don't like him either," Cameron said. But Danny Dyson was right about one thing: they were severely outgunned. John had told her not to go online or to hack into anything, but if Danny was correct – and she saw no reason why he'd exaggerate their capabilities or assets – they were at an extreme disadvantage. She activated her wireless capabilities and connected to the nearest satellite in orbit, using several tricks to mask her presence, she began to search for what she needed to help even the odds.

Chapter 26

Technical Sergeant Dave Wells leaned back in his chair, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He looked up at the other people in the room, all diligently working at their own computer consoles, their heads down and chatter to a minimum. He tilted his head and cracked his neck, reached up and massaged the tense knots of muscle above his shoulders with one of his hands. "I need a break," he muttered. He'd been working for hours, staring at a computer screen since seven in the morning. He looked at his wristwatch and saw it was coming up on twelve. *And lunch,* he thought.

He leaned over to the uniformed female sergeant on his left. "Kelly; you wanna get some coffee?"

"Are you done?" she asked.

"Not yet," he replied. "But I've been staring at the screen for nearly five hours and I've got a headache."

She pondered it for a moment and looked at her own screen. They weren't done by a long shot, but Dave had a point. "Sure," she said. "I could do with a little break, too; the Colonel's been working us like slaves lately."

"I should have joined the army," Dave sighed wistfully as he got up out of his chair and stretched his arms and legs. His curse in life had been his gift with computers. The air force had seen the potential of a computer whizz kid who was just as agile physically as he was on a PC, and he'd quickly been snatched up and found himself working for US Cyber Command. "Life would be easier."

"What, getting shot up in Helmand? Forget it," Kelly smirked.

"At least those guys get days off," Dave shot back. Life had been pretty cushy until lately. He'd done tours of Iraq and Afghanistan but because he'd been part of Cyber Command he'd never had to leave the base. It was a demanding job but now things had got even worse since that hacker had created a roving back door in the defence network. His unit had been tasked with eliminating it; a task that they'd been assigned to for months without success, and the CO was breathing down all their necks for it.

"Goddamn Colonel Richards," Kelly agreed.

Dave tidied up his files and stuck them into a drawer in his desk, pushed the chair in and was about to turn the screen off when something flashed up and caught his attention. A dialogue box flashed an urgent red and lines of data scrolled down the screen so quickly he had to skim over it to get the gist. All thoughts of coffee disappeared from his mind immediately as he read over the text.

"Colonel!" he shouted out to his CO. The tall, rakish officer barged through the rows of analysts and programmers working on their own consoles, who were all peering over their screens like meerkats at him.

"What is it, sergeant?" Richards asked as he stood behind Dave and looked at his screen.

"We've got another hack," he said, urgency and nervousness in his voice. Kelly stood there and watched the screen too, staring unmoving as she made sense of the jumble of data streaming onto the computer terminal.

Dave sat back down in his chair and his fingers over the keyboard as he furiously typed, trying to get a fix on whoever or whatever was doing this. "Come on, you bastard," he muttered as he ran a trace and ran an analysis on the data he was receiving and get some idea of what was going on.

"Where's it coming from?" Richards asked impatiently. If it was domestic – some hackers in a garage somewhere – then they'd get the feds down there like a flash, and if it was foreign; Chinese, North Korean or Iranian would be his guess, then they could try and employ a few tricks of their own.

"Unknown," Dave shook his head in disbelief. "I can't lock it down; whoever's doing this is rerouting it from over a dozen military and civilian satellites; they're covering their tracks. I can't even tell *what it is,* let alone where it's coming from." The signals he was getting and the little data they'd got didn't correspond to anything he'd ever seen before. "Analysis is inconclusive," he said. "It keeps growing and changing faster than we can track it."

"What's it doing?" Richards asked. "Can we at least figure that out?"

Another round of rapid fire typing brought up another window that listed everything that had been accessed. There were millions of files that had been probed. Nothing had been changed, however; there were no attempts to bring down the defence network or scramble their codes. None of the usual cyber terror tactics they'd seen before.

He typed and typed, and watched as whatever it was attacked Cyber Command's defences and made short work of it. He threw up firewalls and they were torn down. He had no idea what the hell this thing even was. "It's like a virus, but it keeps changing. We're throwing everything we've got at it but it keeps adapting before our defences can touch it."

"Jesus," Kelly whispered. "It's just like before."

Richards' jaw set and he glared down at the screen, privately agreeing with the woman. At least they'd caught the hacker who'd created the roving back door; he was now rotting in jail and probably would be for the rest of his life. So far they'd been able to delete the program, but this new cyber attack, whatever it was, had blown that right out of the water. It hadn't even needed a back door to get in; it

had made short work of their cyber defences. He'd seen some pretty good hacking attempts but nothing like this; this was fucking online blitzkrieg.

"Whatever it is, sir," Dave swallowed nervously as even more depressing news appeared on screen. "It's in: complete access to everything."

His CO blinked as the words sunk into his brain. The ramifications, the consequences of this could be dire. "You're telling me whoever this is has access to *all* military communications?"

"Yes sir: I'm telling you that whatever this is, it's got full access across the board; from payroll to our nuke subs. If they want to send a launch order to our boomers they can do."

"We're not even in control of our own military?" the colonel gasped. How the hell could this happen?

"It's not doing anything," Kelly noted. "It's just... stopped.

Why would it do that? Dave asked himself. It had total access and as far as he could tell it wasn't doing anything he'd expect to happen if someone had managed to effectively run rings around Cyber Command. Were they doing it just to show they could?

Kelly, now at her own computer console, was analysing and tracking the same attack, and suddenly she saw a lot more activity spring up. A list of files popped up as they were accessed. "Whatever it is, they're interested in our UCAV programmes," she said warily. The virus was soaking in everything they had on unmanned aerial vehicles, absorbing it like a sponge. Whether it was trying to take control of them or simply discover technical secrets, she didn't know. She guessed they'd find out soon.

"Listen up, all of you!" he shouted out. Every single person in the room stopped what they were doing and looked up at their CO, now red in the face and looking supremely pissed off. "We've been

hacked; the defence network is compromised and we're at the mercy of this... *virus* – for lack of a better term – until we can destroy it. I want everyone in this room to stop what they're doing and start working out how we're going to beat this thing, whatever it takes. Get on it."

He stormed out of the room, supremely pissed off and dreading what he was going to have to do now. The Joint Chiefs and the president were gonna be pissed off about this. The only plus side he could see was that it might light a fire up under Congress' ass and get them to sign up to this new Skynet programme. Once they had their own dedicated AI running Cyber Command this kind of thing shouldn't ever happen again. *It can't come a moment too soon,* he said to himself.

At only nine-thirty the internet cafe wasn't exactly heaving, but it was busy enough to make Knowles nervous as he sat at his computer. There were a few people around; a couple of backpackers who were uploading photos onto some website. Facebook or the like; he had no idea. His daughters were into that kind of crap, not him. He could just about work his way around a computer but truth be told he didn't like the things all too much, and was more than happy to let his wife do most of the legwork when it came to things like accessing their accounts online or using the internet to book a vacation.

An old lady sat in the corner, typing away and browsing at something or other, he wasn't paying that much attention, only concerned with making sure none of them were watching him. After Kate and Amy had left he'd changed into jeans, boots and a thin sweater, packed a rucksack with spare clothes and his disassembled rifle. He'd left his house five minutes after his family had gone, locking it all up behind him. He'd driven the Kaliba SUV around aimlessly for an hour or so before taking it to a more run down area and deliberately leaving the car on a street corner with the keys still in the ignition. He'd then taken three buses to get him to Van Nuys, and he'd spent the night

sat in the terminal until morning, all the while he'd decided to do some research to help him piece together what was going on. He'd called his wife that evening, and she'd confirmed they'd safely made it to San Diego, though she hadn't been happy at all about it and had brought up all the problems in their marriage, most she'd claimed, were his fault. He didn't care: they were alive; that was all that counted for now. He'd rather be divorced than a widower.

Knowles brought up the Google homepage and started to type *Sarah Connor,* into the search engine. He stopped before he pressed enter. Danny had bragged about his AI, in the way that all kids his age had to gloat about something. He remembered him saying how his AI could sweep vast swathes of the internet in a single second. Was it looking for him now? He wondered. If they did send out a team after him and his family then chances are they'd still be looking for him, and if this computer was half as good as Danny had said then they'd probably have it searching for him. Maybe this search wasn't such a good idea, he thought, but he needed some answers.

He held down the *delete* key and erased the name, replacing it with *female domestic terrorists.* Within seconds the results came up, and sure enough, Sarah Connor's name was mentioned on fourteen of the top twenty sites shown. He clicked on one, an article by the LA Times that mentioned her recent reappearance after being dead for several years. That wasn't it. He went back and tried another, a psychiatric report by a Dr Peter Silberman. *The Dangers of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Sarah Connor Case.*

Knowles clicked on it and started to read the life story of Sarah Connor. He'd just gotten into it when a waitress with what he could only describe as the best ass he'd ever seen in his life came over and deposited a large cup of steaming black coffee and a large bagel. "Anything else, sweetie?" she asked, flashing him a beaming smile.

"That's great, thanks," he pulled out a $20 and pushed it into her hand. Rear-of-the-year beamed her pearly whites at him again as she pocketed the note.

"You need anything else, you just let me know," she said, before turning round and giving him another view of spectacular peach. He was married but didn't see the harm in window shopping.

He sipped the steaming hot strong coffee and carefully read the report. It documented how a 19 year old Sarah Connor had been the victim of a stalker back in 1984. She'd been out when her roommate and her boyfriend had been murdered in their shared apartment; blown to pieces by a heavy calibre weapon. She'd then been abducted by a man Silberman described as a delusional schizophrenic, who'd made Sarah believe she was being hunted by a machine from the future that was programmed to kill her, and that her – at the time unborn – son would one day lead a rebellion against machines hell bent on wiping out the human race.

"Not *that* delusional," Knowles muttered with a mouthful of bagel. He wondered if the machine she'd claimed to have seen – if she'd really seen anything – was like Baldy. In his mind's eye he could still see the gunmetal grey skull and the glowing red eye staring at him. He shivered slightly at the thought of it and read on, murmuring to himself as he scanned the text.

"Her abductor – Kyle Reese's – claims of a futuristic assassin were given weight in her mind when another individual, thought to be an accomplice of Reese, assaulted West Highland Police Station, killing seventeen police officers single handed and wounding four more. It's believed the individual had extensive military training, and the attack was undertaken to extract Reese and Sarah Connor, who were under protective custody in the precinct at the time."

There was a photo of the individual who'd attacked the station, a thumbnail image at the bottom of the paragraph of a man in a black leather jacket and sunglasses, taken by the station's security cameras. He clicked on the image to enlarge it.

"Jesus Christ!" Knowles choked on the hot coffee and barely managed to stop himself from spewing it all out onto the screen. He coughed violently and struggled to clear his throat, causing the other

patrons, and rear-of-the-year, to stare at him with concern. "Sorry," he mouthed to the pretty waitress. He looked at the image again to be sure. *"It can't be..."* The photo he was looking at – of the man who assaulted West Highland Precinct in 1984, killed seventeen police officers and disappeared into the night, only to reappear again twelve years later, break Connor out of a mental institution and vanish once more – the same man that, according to the rest of the article, Sarah Connor believed to be one of these terminator machines - was... *"Steroids."*

The giant mountain of a man who was head of security at Kaliba; the same man who'd recruited him, in fact, was a goddamn cyborg: the same one that she and this Kyle Reese guy claimed were after her. His heart was racing at a mile a minute but he forced himself to read on to the end of the article, greedily absorbing every single scrap of information, every last word.

"What the fuck have I been doing?" he asked himself. Sarah Connor, John Connor, machines, Danny Dyson and his father Miles, Cyberdine, Skynet, artificial intelligences... This wasn't a fucking coincidence, he realised. "It's all real," he muttered. There really were terminators out there, and Baldy and Steroids were among them. Did that mean all of Kaliba were machines too?

He logged off the computer, grabbed his bag and finished off his coffee in one swig, and left the table, abandoning his half eaten bagel on a plat next to the desktop. He smiled at the waitress as he left the cafe and stepped out onto the street. All of a sudden he knew what he needed to do. Sarah Connor wasn't crazy. She'd been right all along. He realised he'd been on the wrong side. Kaliba were at least partly run by there terminator things, and they were selling an AI to the air force, which is what Sarah Connor had claimed would end up nuking the world and trying to wipe out the human race.

"Not if I have anything to do with it," he growled as he walked down the street. Kaliba wanted to find him: then they were going to get him, and he was going to ram their AI right down their fucking throats.

Water boiled and steamed, sauce bubbled over, and the smell of onions and chicken cooking wafted through the room. There were seven people in the room; two stood up whilst the rest waited at the table. Six were hungry, two were so famished that the mere scent of cooking food had their stomachs growling aggressively and set them off, salivating like dogs.

"I'm starving," Savannah muttered. The smell of food – proper, *actual food* – being so close, almost ready, and yet so far was driving her crazy. After a lifetime of having to scavenge, hunt or forage for mere morsels, it was all she could do to not jump up from her seat at the dining table and devour the first edible thing she saw. She looked across and saw her younger self, sat next to Ellison and showing considerably more restraint.

The younger Weaver sat quietly with her hands folded on her lap beneath the table and just watched everyone else. She stared at the older redhead, unaware of who she really was, and looked away when their eyes met. The other lady scared her.

"Elbows off the table," Ellison said to Future-Savannah.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly, instantly complying. She took a swig of the orange juice from her glass and held it in her mouth for a long moment, savouring the taste for as long as she could before she swallowed it in a big gulp. "This is *good,"* she grinned.

"It's only orange juice," Danny spoke up from the foot of the table.

"I'm sorry, rich boy," she shot back. "Not all of us were raised on champagne and caviar."

"Not all of us were raised in a barn, either," Danny replied, seeing droplets of juice run down her chin.

"What's the longest you've gone without food for?" she glared at him, "a few hours; a day, maybe?"

John rolled his eyes and groaned inwardly. "Savannah..."

Both girls looked at him and then the younger Savannah looked to her older counterpart. "You're called Savannah too?" she asked.

"It's a good name; all the cool people are called Savannah," Future-Savannah winked. She felt guilty for being so hard on her younger self earlier. She'd thought she was being cruel to be kind – sparing her the truth that would drive her nuts and turn her into a drug addicted alcoholic doing whatever for her next fix.

John turned to his mom and Cameron stood up at oven and cooking. "Do you need a hand?" John asked his mom.

"I'm okay," Sarah sighed. She poured the rice from the saucepan into the colander and let it drain into the sink as steam erupted from it. Before John, Ellison had offered to cook, or help her, and she'd declined. And Cameron had hovered over and tried to help, too. But she'd been insistent on doing it alone. This was John's homecoming meal and she wanted to do it herself.

As Sarah stirred the sweet and sour sauce once more Cameron inspected the rice, increasing magnification as she scanned it. "It's over-boiled," she said. It had been cooked too long and had turned mushy and soggy.

"Do you want to eat it or wear it?" Sarah hefted the sauce-filled pan. She wasn't going to take cooking advice from a machine.

"Neither," Cameron deadpanned.

"Just... get out of the way," she groaned. Cameron heeded her warning and stepped back, deciding not to comment anymore and let Sarah work. Sarah dished out the rice onto six plates and then ladled out the sweet and sour chicken on top. The safehouse hadn't

been stocked with any meat, since anything perishable would have gone off long before they'd had chance to use it; on the way back from Oxnard Airport they'd driven into a small grocery store and she'd bought some chicken, onions, peppers and peas, and orange juice. John's first home cooked meal deserved more than just MREs or tinned sausage and beans, and she'd wanted to make an effort.

She picked up three plates and carried them over to the table – years of working as a waitress paying off as she balanced one on her forearm. She didn't see Cameron carrying the other three with ease and setting them down at the other places, too. The elder Connor then sat down at the head of the table, opposite Danny, and Cameron seated herself between John and his mother, something Sarah grudgingly noted had happened a lot lately.

Barely had the two women sat down before John and Savannah attacked their meals with ferocity, picking up their forks and shovelling food into their mouths as quickly as they could, as if it might be taken away from them at any minute. Sarah, Little-Savannah, Ellison and Danny watched the two of them with awe at the speed they were devouring their meals.

Danny picked at his and took a mouthful. The chicken was overdone and he could tell the sauce came from a jar, even without seeing the empty glass vessel on the kitchen sink. It was okay, but he could tell already that Sarah Connor was no chef.

"Mmm... mom, this is amazing," John said with a mouth still full of food. He noticed that his mom hadn't made any for Cameron, and she just sat idly next to him, upright and alert as always, watching all of them.

"It's just sweet and sour chicken," Sarah shrugged modestly between mouthfuls. She found it flattering that he and Savannah seemed to like it so much. "What did you eat in the future?" she asked them.

"Not much," Savannah replied. "Rats, squirrels; if we were lucky, maybe dog."

"Ewww," Little-Savannah screwed her face up.

"It's not that bad," she said to her miniature self. "Goes well if you fry it."

"In some countries it's a delicacy," Ellison pointed out. "They eat dogs in Korea."

John shovelled more rice and chicken into his mouth. He'd thought that the *KFC* he'd eaten was good, but this was a delight! "Eating dog in the future was like Christmas dinner and Thanksgiving all rolled into one."

"Next you'll say that people ate other people," Danny said. He didn't doubt what they were saying, after seeing inside Cameron's head, but the future they'd described sounded like pure hell. How could people go as low as that?

"That happened too," Cameron added. She'd seen tunnel rats in her future eat the bodies of people who'd either been killed by machines, each other, or died of disease. Medical treatments were much like in the 18th Century; consisting of hacking off limbs too badly damaged to be saved. There'd always been tunnel rats lurking outside infirmaries, waiting for either a limb or a dead body to be removed.

"Do you want some?" John shifted his plate to Cameron. He'd noticed how his mom hadn't made her any, knew it was as much a gesture as it was because she didn't need to eat. *You're not one of us,* was the unconscious message he could see his mom trying to send Cameron. He wasn't having any of it, though. Cameron meant more to him than anyone sitting at the table could possibly realise, and he wasn't going to let her be outcast, even though she probably wouldn't care.

"You finish it," Cameron said, pushing his plate back to him. John would need to eat more to put the weight back on that he'd lost in the future. She'd prefer him to finish it off and be satiated than for him to go hungry for her sake.

Sarah was surprised at her son offering food to Cameron. Surely, after starving in the future, and knowing how tight their budget always was in the present, that they shouldn't waste food on a machine that didn't need to eat. She was about to say as much but she spotted another look shared between them and decided it would be best left for another time.

"What did you do for all that time in the future?" Ellison asked older Savannah.

"Waited for John, pretty much," she replied. "We spent most of it in Mexico; we were so remote we never even saw any machines for a few years. It wasn't too bad then; we were on the coast so there were plenty of fish to eat, until the machines caught on and put machine patrols along the beaches and in the water." Trying to catch fish had been a serious risk; she remembered watching, as a ten year old girl, one of the men in the village out fishing. He'd been attacked by hydrobots and torn to shreds in front of her eyes. After that she'd never gone in the water again. Few ever did.

Ellison couldn't help but notice she'd said *'we'* and looked him straight in the eye as she'd spoken. It was so strange to think he'd taken care of her for so long; he couldn't even imagine trying to survive in the future John had come from, let alone bringing up a little girl as well. She'd said he did a good job but he'd noticed she wasn't exactly stable. She had issues; he didn't know with what or where they'd come from, but she wasn't compos mentis, and he wondered how good a job he really had done, or would do if he looked after her younger self. Maybe nobody who lived through the war would really be normal by today's standards, he thought. Living through that must put a lot of strain on people. Either way, he wondered if he'd be able to do right by her if he had to. Weaver had mentioned grandparents back in Scotland; would she be better off with them? He asked himself.

"When we travelled up north towards the border it got worse, and when we made it into LA it was like nothing I'd seen before, even after the bombs went off..." she was about to paint a vivid description

of just how hellish the future was but she looked at her younger self and decided that no seven year old should have to hear about bleached skulls and machines slaughtering humans on sight, or how people raped, pillaged and murdered to get what they wanted after the world broke down. It'd probably give the kid nightmares, and she had plenty of her own. "We can't let it happen again," she finally said.

A tense, awkward silence fell over the room. Nobody could think of anything to say after that; Savannah had unintentionally buzz-killed the dinner, and everyone sat quietly, stating down at the table or into space, either imagining or remembering the hellish future that befell the world if they failed.

"It must be *really* bad if it makes this food taste good," Danny said. Ellison couldn't resist a snigger, and he was quickly followed by Little-Savannah and John. Even Cameron smiled slightly at the insinuation on Sarah's cooking.

"No dessert for you, then," she shot back with one eyebrow raised. *Touche,* she smirked inwardly. Danny remained silent, unable to think of a comeback.

"I'll have his," both John and Savannah instantly blurted out eagerly.

"You don't even know what it is," Ellison pointed out to them.

Savannah simply shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. "It's dessert; it's sweet: I want it."

"Key lime pie with whipped cream or custard. Cameron, it's yours," Sarah uncharacteristically offered the cyborg.

"She doesn't even need to eat," Danny protested. Sarah obviously hadn't made it, not having had the time or in his opinion, the skill to make one herself. It must be store-bought. And it sounded pretty damn good to him.

"Nor do you, apparently," Sarah said, pointing at the half eaten meal still left on his plate. Without a moment's hesitation the elder Savannah reached over and grabbed said plate, liberating it from its owner and placing it down over her empty one. She promptly dug into Danny's meal as everyone watched, amazed at how she could pile so much food away so quickly. Sarah simply smiled; it seemed she had another fan of her cooking now. She had a feeling she'd get far fewer complaints at mealtimes from now on.

The desert air was still warm at night, the landscape empty and barren; just how Cameron liked it. It was easier to spot anything approaching in the flat terrain of the desert all around them. The only breaks in the monotonous, rocky ground were patches of sparse scrubland dotted around, but she was confident there was nothing hiding in them. She scanned the area and found only eleven heat signatures indicative of living creatures; none were larger than a rat.

Everyone had gone to bed over an hour ago, and Cameron had decided to patrol the perimeter. John, Savannah, and even Ellison had offered to take their turns but Cameron had declined. They needed sleep, especially John. Cameron wanted to be sure he'd recovered fully from the hunger and exhaustion he'd suffered in the last few days in the future, and until she was satisfied he had she was going to be strict with him. She trusted his abilities but he was still only human: people got tired and made mistakes, and when it came to ensuring his safety, mistakes were unacceptable.

She found herself in a difficult position with John. His safety had always been paramount but now even more so. She loved him: she'd come to terms with what she felt for him, and as such the thought of him coming to any harm disturbed her deeply. But John had grown over the past three months; he was a leader in his own right and he'd shown in the future that he led from the front. He'd told her – both Future-John and her John – that he'd felt ashamed that so many people had died either for him or because of him. He wasn't

going to risk anyone else by sending them to fight, not without risking himself along with them. It would make her life difficult but at the same time she felt a sense of pride in how much he'd grown. He'd been ahead of schedule in how much he'd needed to learn, before the jump to the future. Now he was further ahead than she could have possibly predicted. The three months he'd spent in the future had matured him by ten years.

She marched clockwise around the safehouse and held an AK-47 in one hand as she swept the area for movement. She looked out to the east, at the vast expanse of desert in front of her that travelled as far as even her eyes could see. Somewhere out there, Kaliba were building machines. They had a fully sentient, sapient and self aware AI that would soon become Skynet.

Boots crunched on loose rock behind her and she spun around in an instant, bringing her rifle to bear.

"Don't shoot," John held up his hands in mock surrender, a slight grin spread across his lips despite the assault rifle pointed at his chest. Cameron immediately lowered it as he stepped closer to her. He had his own HK-417 held in his hands and a pair of magazines clipped together, loaded into the rifle. For over a month in the future he hadn't gone anywhere without at least one loaded rifle on him and spare ammunition. Even in the past, out in the desert and away from civilisation, he didn't feel safe anymore. He wondered if he ever would again.

"You're meant to be asleep," Cameron told him.

"Can't," he said with a shrug. "Want some company?"

There was no hesitation at all from Cameron, she just nodded and John stepped beside her. They started walking the perimeter once more, side by side. John hadn't been lying when he'd said he couldn't sleep. There was a lot on his mind and a hell of a lot more rode on them being able to find Kaliba and take it out. He had no idea how they were going to hope to do that after what Danny had

told them. UCAVs – combat capable versions of the drone they saw in the desert and that crashed into Zeiracorp tower – mercenaries, and he'd bet every last thing he had – which he depressingly realised, wasn't much – that they had a terminator with them as well. They didn't know what happened to the machine posing as a water delivery guy after Cameron threw him down the hill. Even if he was gone; where there was one, there'd be more. They wouldn't take any chances when it came to protecting the developing Skynet, just as Cameron and his mom had always been unwilling to risk him.

John looked up at the stars in the sky, still unused to seeing them after being so long under radioactive dust clouds hanging in the high atmosphere. He'd been trained by his mom to navigate using the stars, and he easily recognised Polaris shining brightly. There were so many of them. Cameron looked upwards and saw what he was staring at. She too could navigate using the stars as a guide, although it was programmed into her rather than a learnt skill like with John.

The stars in the sky were more interesting to her than they'd been in the past; a navigation aid or a way to calculate the date when nothing else was available. But as she looked at them now she was curious.

"Three hundred and fifty-eight," she said.

John looked at her, confused. "Huh?" he asked.

"The number of stars I can see right now," she explained.

John nodded. "Do you think there's life on any of those?"

"It's possible." Cameron had never considered the possibility of extraterrestrial life before. She knew Sarah had followed after people who firmly believed there were aliens and that they were coming to Earth. They were mistaken, however. What they'd believed to be UFOs were in fact the HK prototype drone they'd seen before. Technically she was an alien life form, she realised. Not of this world

– created in another, alternate timeline in a future that may or may not happen. It was as alien as if she had come from another planet.

"Do you think any of them might be stupid enough to build their own Skynet too?"

"Some probably have," Cameron replied.

"Kinda depressing," John said wistfully. "There could be a million worlds out there with a million Skynets, doing just the same as here."

"They could have their own John Connors," Cameron supplied. "Fighting back."

"I feel sorry for them," he said. "There's a million John Connors out there but there's only one Cameron."

She smiled at him, grateful for the compliment. "I'm unique," she agreed. There could be a thousand AIs but she realised that even a machine with the exact same hardware, coding and programming could never be the same as her. Partly because she was two AIs merged, but mostly, she realised, from what she'd already learnt beforehand. She was more than she'd originally been designed as, and after John Henry had merged into her she realised she was had the potential to be so much more, still. She didn't know if it was because of the merge that she could develop, or whether she'd always had the capability. But now, unlike before, she didn't see herself as 'just a machine.' She was Cameron.

"That you are," John agreed. "You're definitely something special." He'd seen it in her from the moment they'd met. Even after finding out what she was, there'd always been something different about her. He'd never been able to put his finger on it, and still couldn't. It didn't matter what it was, it was there.

"What happens if we stop Skynet?" Cameron asked him. They'd talked about it but he hadn't told her anything definite. Her entire life

revolved around John and stopping Skynet, she had nothing else. "What should I do? Sarah will want to shut me down."

"Not gonna happen," John growled. "Mom won't do that to you."

"She destroyed the other machine. She's afraid if there's anything left it will all start again. She has a point."

John stopped walking and turned to face her. "Do you care if you die?" he asked her. The 'Uncle Bob' terminator hadn't cared one way or the other. It had its orders to protect him, and once it had fulfilled them it had sacrificed itself – very nobly, he thought – to prevent Skynet from ever coming back. It had failed, sure, but he was afraid either Cameron or his mom wouldn't see it that way.

"If it keeps you safe, no," she said.

He shook his head and sighed, a little frustrated she hadn't understood. "Forget about me for a moment. Let's say we stop Skynet for good this time. Do you care if you die? Do you *want* to live?"

The answer to that came immediately to Cameron. "I want to be with you." She'd prefer to live than not, but the main reason for that was John.

"Good answer," John said, relief flooding over him. Images of Cameron descending into molten steel, or burning in a thermite pyre had flashed up in his minds eye and scared him more than anything else he could imagine.

"But I'm dangerous," she continued. She didn't want to address the issue that had disturbed her more than any other, but she had to. "I could go bad; I could still try to kill you."

That wasn't at all what John wanted to hear, and his heart sank as Cameron melting in a burnt out Cadillac returned vividly to his

imagination and sent a chill down his spine. "It's still there," Cameron added.

"Didn't merging with John Henry erase it?" he asked. She'd never told him that but he'd hoped, and now he felt himself grasping at straws.

"It's a part of me," she explained sadly. "It can't be removed or erased."

"So it's always going to be there?" John asked.

Cameron nodded sadly, "yes. I don't want to kill you but I might someday."

John shook his head fiercely at her. "You won't," he shot back.

"You don't know that." If it happened she'd never be able to control it. "If it happens you'll have to kill me."

"I won't do it," John said. He could never kill her, ever. There was no way he'd just gone through three months of a living hell to get her back, only to lose her again. He wouldn't allow it. "And it won't happen." He knew that wouldn't appease her, though, and decided to try and talk her around. "What are the odds of it happening again?"

"Slim," Cameron admitted. She didn't know the exact odds as she didn't fully understand herself anymore. Humans would deem the risk barely worth mentioning, but she wasn't human. "But I don't want to risk you."

"Let me worry about me," John told her. "I told you before: I can't do any of this without you. I don't even want to try. Even if we stop Skynet, you're the only friend I've got."

"You were friends with Morris and Riley; you could make other friends."

John suppressed a short, sharp laugh. Morris hadn't exactly been a friend, just a guy he'd spoken to at school. Friends hung out after school and did things together. He'd never done that with anyone since Tim, back when he was twelve; and as for Riley...

"Riley was a lie," he said to her. He took a step towards her, breaching the gap between them and made sure she was looking at him and listening intently. "She lied to me but I lied to myself even more. I only saw her because I couldn't have you." When he thought about it, he didn't have a damn thing in common with her, beyond knowing about the future. Not with the Riley he'd known, anyway. The Riley he didn't know – the real Riley – he'd never known. All he'd known was the lie. "You're the only real friend I've had since I was twelve; you're the only one apart from mom who's seen the real me."

Technically, Savannah had as well, Cameron thought. But she knew that was beside John's point. She understood very well what he meant, and what he'd been through. Being John Connor was lonely; he needed a companion and she wanted to be there for him, but she was still afraid she'd revert and try to kill him. Nothing could allay that fear.

"If you kill me, you kill me," John said firmly. "I'd rather you stay and kill me in six months or a year, two, ten... than live for a hundred without you. I need you, Cameron. I won't make it an order, but I'm asking you to stay, whatever happens."

Cameron didn't want to risk his life, but he was adamant life without her wasn't worth living. She thought about it and decided she should have realised from his reaction to her leaving before. He'd risked his own life and jumped to the future to find her. He'd been beaten, starved, interrogated, hunted, and nearly killed for her. He'd confessed his true feelings for her and they'd made love together. She loved him more than anything, and she realised that if she'd left him it would destroy him as much as if she shot him herself. She loved him too much for him to suffer in her absence.

"I will," she said. She leaned forward and kissed him softly, smiling against his lips as she felt him respond and pull her closer to him. She wouldn't leave him, she couldn't. They were connected, and she decided that he was right; their mutual happiness was worth the risk.

Beep... beep... beep... the high pitched ringtone shattered the quiet of the night and a blue glow emanated from a cell phone in the corner of the room. *Beep... beep... beep...* it continued to ring and Savannah sat upright on the floor, instantly wide awake, and searched around for the offending device. It was next to Ellison, laid out on the floor and starting to stir at the foot of the bed, at a right angle to her on the right-hand side of it. She reached over him for the phone, flipped it open and put it to her ear. "Hello?"

Beep... beep... beep... "Shit!" Savannah looked to Ellison, confused, and poked him. He opened his eyes and sat up looking at her, illuminated by the glow of the phone's display. "How do you answer this thing?" she hissed, not wanting to wake up her younger self. She handed it to him and he pressed a button.

"Yes?" he asked sleepily, wondering who could possibly be calling him at this time of the night. It must be three or four in the morning, easily.

"Hello James, did I disturb you?" Malenkov's voice rang clear as a bell over the phone, which seemed to exaggerate his Ukrainian accent more than when he spoke face to face.

"What time is it?" the former agent groggily asked as he rubbed sleep from his eyes.

"Three-fifty-one a.m., I hope you weren't busy." Ellison detected a tone that implied Malenkov wasn't really bothered. Nobody who cared about disturbing people called them at nearly four in the morning, but he knew there was no point in telling that to a man like

Malenkov; his question had been completely rhetorical. It didn't matter what he was doing. Ellison wondered if the man ever slept.

"Did you find anything?" he asked, thinking this could be the only reason for calling so late.

"Yes, I've found out what you wanted to know."

Ellison nodded to Savannah, who he could just about make out watching him expectantly in the dark. She was on her knees leaning forward, straining to hear the conversation. *What is it?* She mouthed to him.

"What did you find?" He asked.

"There will be time for that later. I have a job for your friend Savannah; an exciting one. Meet me at my home, one p.m. tomorrow, and I'll give you the details. Once the job is done I will tell you what I've found." The line disconnected and the phone went dead.

"What did he say?" Savannah asked, feeling more than a little impatient.

Ellison looked at her in the darkness, not looking forward to this one bit. "The job you said you'd do for him; he wants to meet tomorrow to discuss it."

"We've got more important things to do," she shot back. She'd made that deal expecting it to be months down the line, if at all. She'd thought they'd be able to take out Skynet and Kaliba first. "We don't have time for this," she breathed.

He couldn't agree more with Savannah. He sighed and shook his head, resigned. "He's got our information: we don't have any other choice." Savannah would have to do the job but he wasn't going to let her do it alone.

Chapter 27

John stepped closer to Cameron, at the table inside the shed, tinkering with something. There were tools and random pieces of metal set out on the table and it was clear she'd been up to something. He wanted to believe Cameron when she'd said she didn't kill Riley, he really did. But things did go wrong with her. He saw a small chain in her hand and approached, curious. "What have you been doing? You've been out here for hours."

Cameron turned to him, holding something small and silver in her hands. "Making something," she said, her voice soft as it always was when she spoke to him. He tried not to think about what that could imply. "For you," she pushed the object gently into his hands, piquing his curiosity.

"What is it?" he asked as he looked down at it. It was an old pocket watch. What had she been doing out here for hours with an old antique? It had been polished and looked quite good, he had to admit. Maybe it was her idea of a present?

"You tried to fix me, twice now," Cameron replied, looking straight at him. John tried to read the expression on her face but there was nothing discernable there. It wasn't blank, but whatever it was she was showing, he couldn't tell what it was. "It's not working."

John felt a tinge of worry creep into him as she spoke. What was she trying to tell him? "And?"

"I'm not capable of self-termination," Cameron told him without hesitation.

"Suicide."

"I can't kill myself, but you can."

John's eyes widened, not believing what he was hearing from her and he did a double take at her words. What was going on in her chip? He shook his head adamantly in denial. "Why would I wanna kill you?" He'd been pissed off with her plenty, sure, but and he wanted her to leave him alone and give him some space, but he didn't want anything to happen to her...

"You might have to someday."

He opened the watch, knowing just what she meant. She was worried she'd go bad and try to kill him again, and she was giving him the means to stop her if it happened, placing her life in his hands...

The soldier nodded and ran out of the door, disappearing into the din and leaving Kyle alone with John. "You led them here," he pointed a finger at John. He'd been willing to hear John out, even heard his crazy story about time travel and humoured him, but Derek was right; the kid was definitely working for Skynet, had led the machines right to them.

He picked John up by the lapels of his jacket, lifted him off the chair and slammed him back into the wall. "You bastard," he snarled, flecks of spittle flew into John's face. "You killed us, John. You! If we make it through this we're gonna nail you to the goddamn wall."

John watched his not-father raging at him, murder in his eyes, but he didn't say a word in his own defence; anything he said now would just incriminate him further. Another explosion rocked outside and Kyle look backwards as the door to their room blew open.

John saw no choice; even if they dealt with the machine he'd be their next target. They'd never believe he was innocent now. He pushed forward and screamed out in rage as he slammed his forehead into Kyle's nose. The younger Reese cried out in shock and stepped backwards, but John slammed his fists against Kyle's face and stomach, shoved him against the wall and kneed him hard in the balls, doubling him over as pain wracked his body. John brought his

elbow down on crown of Kyle's head and the man who wasn't his father dropped to the floor with a low groan and lay still.

"I'm sorry," John muttered as he fished through Kyle's pockets. He found a flashlight in one thigh pocket and pulled it out. He pulled the door aside, slipped out, and saw flashes of plasma fire, and explosions flared through the large main chamber, and the machine was instantly obvious; half its face was missing and a bright blue orb glowed brightly in the darkened basement. The sight of the terminator stopped him in its tracks. It wasn't the hulking monster he'd been expecting. This one was shorter, slimmer, feminine... "Cameron?" he gaped, aghast at the sight of her gunning down Derek and his men without mercy. No! No, no , no, no; this wasn't right at all.

Half her face was gone but the one side still covered in flesh was clearly her. Her hair stuck out, frazzled and unkempt. Her organic eye looked to him, wide open and afraid; pleading, even, while the exposed blue machine orb glared at him coldly as she pointed a pair of plasma rifles at him and fired. Blue-white light flashed all around John and everything went dark...

John watched from Serrano Point's perimeter fence as Ellison ran back to Kyle and started dragging him towards their exit. "Come on!" he shouted out, urging them onward. He wanted to go and help but Cameron had one hand on his webbing and he knew she wouldn't let him risk himself like that. With a strength belied by his age, Ellison heaved John's not-father closer and closer to them. "Come on," *John muttered, willing them to move faster.* "Come on..."

Jet engines roared from above and John looked up with immediate dread as an HK soared above the main complex and cast its search beam down on Kyle and Ellison's. But it wasn't Ellison anymore. Cameron stood alone in the harsh glare of the beam and looked upwards. " Run!" *he screamed at her as hard as he could. But Cameron remained rooted to the spot, either not hearing or not listening to him.* "Run!"

The world slowed down to a crawl as the HK's plasma cannon swivelled in her direction and John's heart went berserk in his chest. Cameron was in its line of fire. He swung his weapon up at the machine but it weighed a ton. It was so heavy in his hands and he struggled to bear it upwards at the mechanical bird of prey, his arms burned and shook as he fought to shoulder the weapon and aim it upwards, taking every ounce of strength he had. He held down the trigger and his shots burst out the rifle.

Plasma erupted from the cannon at the same time and streaked into Cameron's position, followed by shot after shot as the weapon carpet-bombed her position. Its plasma cannon unleashed a hailstorm of blue-white bolts that hammered the ground around them, consuming Cameron in roiling flames mixed in with explosions of dirt thrown in all directions like a volcanic eruption as John's world fell apart in slow motion, his heart torn from his chest and ripped to shreds. She reached out through the fires as her flesh burnt from her endoskeleton, her blue glowing eyes staring at him, pleading for him to come to her.

"Help me!" she cried out as the last traces of flesh were seared from her, revealing just the bare metal bones beneath. The fires raged even higher, brighter, too hot even for her to withstand. John watched, helpless as she collapsed to the ground. Somehow he could see her through the flames; her chassis smouldering and glowing white hot, her glowing blue eyes flickered. One exploded and remained dim, and the other blinked erratically as Cameron reached one hand out towards him, begging for help before another blast from the HK conflagrated the fires, engulfing her in an instant, burning her away into nothing.

"CAMERON!"

John shot up out of bed and grabbed for a rifle that wasn't there. "Cameron?" He looked around and saw she wasn't there. He heard

footsteps outside and recognised the sound of her light but mechanical march as she still patrolled outside. He breathed in deeply in relief and sighed out as he collapsed back onto the mattress. It was soaked through, he realised immediately. He could feel sweat dripping off his temples, his neck and his chest, and running down his back, and his heart pounded painfully inside his chest and despite having just been asleep he was almost breathless.

"What the hell was that?" he breathed. He knew full well what it was: the start of the nightmares that would haunt him for a long time to come, and the prospect of it filled him with dread.

He remembered the talk with Cameron the night before; how she'd still worried about going bad. That had happened in the dream; she'd been the one slaughtering through Derek's tunnel. And she'd been killed by the HK, but that had been Ellison and Kyle, not her. Where the hell had that come from?

Weak light filtered through the thin curtains and he peeled them away from the corner of the window. The top of the sun was just poking above the horizon and cast an orange hue over the desert. He didn't have a watch on him but he guessed it was around 5am or so. It was just barely dawn, anyway. Nobody else would be up for at least an hour but no way did he want to go back to bed. He didn't want to sleep again, knowing what horrible things were waiting for him in his dreams.

He got up off the sweat-soaked bed, grabbed a towel and padded out of his room and into the bathroom. He was hot and cold at the same time, slimy and covered in sweat. He looked into the mirror and saw a sheen of perspiration across his forehead, neck, chest and shoulders. He switched the shower on and waited a few moments for the water to heat up before he stepped into the tub and pulled the curtain back over him.

The hot water cascaded over him and sluiced the sweat and dirt of the desert off his body. It would have felt supremely good on his skin but he barely even noticed it. All he could think of was the dream,

seeing Cameron being consumed in glowing flames and blasted apart by plasma. It scared him, terrified him right down to the core. He leaned against the wall and bowed his head under the torrent of water, letting it wash over him. It cleaned his body but did nothing for his mind.

Confusion clouded his brain and he found it hard to think straight as he remembered the dream in horrible clarity. He'd been constantly on the go for months, since Riley had died and he'd confronted Jesse things had gone from bad to worse: losing their home and all but living rough; seeing Charley die, watching Derek getting shot in the head; his mom being arrested, and worst of all, losing Cameron. He'd fought tooth and nail every minute of every day in the future to find her. Just staying alive had been a struggle and he'd had to kill once again to survive. He'd seen and done things more horrible than he could ever imagine, and the idea of history repeating itself again caused John to start shaking as he leaned against the wall.

It was all too much for him; he'd told his mom he'd been through hell in the future, but hell was just a word. The reality had been much, much worse. Whilst he was there he hadn't had the time to think; he'd either been hiding, on the run, or on the offensive. Now he was back and things had stabilised once again, the memories rushed back to him: the man he'd killed, the people he'd watched perish and those he'd led to their deaths. The sheer horror, death and destruction on a global scale started to sink in now he was relatively safe and was no longer busy.

"Fuck!" John shook his head slowly as it all built up inside him. He clenched his fists and punched the wall hard, cutting his knuckle on a piece of tile sticking out. He barely noticed it as tears started to flow from his eyes, invisible amongst the shower spray pouring down onto him. He didn't try to wipe away the water or his own tears, and just remained leaning against the wall. He didn't know how long it was before he felt the hot pain in his hand and saw the trickle of blood from the top of his hand. Droplets of water splashed against it

and diluted the deep crimson liquid, thinning it out and running onto the floor of the tub.

The shower curtain suddenly slid along the rail and pulled aside. John turned around in surprise and saw Cameron, completely naked, step into the shower with him. He took in her nude form as the water ran over her, pebbling up her soft pink nipples and hardening them as he looked at her, and found himself growing aroused as well as confused as to what she was doing.

Cameron took a step towards him and closed the gap between their bodies. She saw the cut on his knuckles and took his hand gently in hers, inspecting it. She'd returned from her patrol to find the room empty and the bed soaked in his sweat. She'd been waiting for him to finish when she'd heard a bang against the wall. He'd taken significantly longer than he normally did for a shower, and she'd decided to investigate.

"What are you doing?" John asked her, still watching her naked form like a hawk, but he looked up to see the look of concern on her face as she ran the pad of her thumb over his knuckles. She held it up to the water so the spray washed away the blood that slowly seeped out, and laced her fingers with his for a moment.

"You shouldn't be alone," she let go of his hand and reached to the side for the shampoo, without ever taking her eyes away from his. She squirted some out onto her free hand and started to knead it into his hair, working up lather and at the same time she meticulously massaged his scalp with her fingertips.

John closed his eyes and moaned quietly, just under his breath, as she continued to work. "Feels good," he smiled at her.

"Close your eyes," she told him. John complied and Cameron pushed him back gently until his head was directly under the shower head, rinsing the lather out. She turned him around so his back was to her and when she was satisfied all the shampoo was gone she continued her ministrations on his neck and shoulders, gently but

firmly kneading out all the knots and working the stress away. She knew she was doing it right when he sighed contentedly, and even though he couldn't see it she smiled. She leaned forward and kissed the back of his neck as she continued to massage him.

John began to relax and Cameron sensed his heart rate and blood pressure dropping, which came as a relief to her. She'd seen the soaked sheets and she'd known what had happened: Future-John often had nightmares, and when she'd done laundry in their old house, Derek's sheets had often been clammy and saturated with sweat. She decided that she would now permanently sleep in his bed with him at night. He'd been comfortable and slept soundly, undisturbed in the motel; the night before their mission to Serrano Point, John had unconsciously moved closer to her when he'd been asleep. She realised that he sought comfort in her presence, in being close to her, and she decided that John wouldn't sleep alone again.

"I didn't think terminators had files on massaging," John said, arching his back as Cameron unknotted the tension in his shoulders.

"We don't," she replied. "This is my first one."

"You're really good at it."

Cameron frowned as she continued to work. His vital signs belied his words; his pulse increased, as did his blood pressure. Massages were supposed to be relaxing: *Am I doing it wrong?*

John turned back towards her and she instantly saw as she looked down that she'd been wrong in her conclusion. She hadn't been doing it wrong; far from it. He stepped towards her and pulled Cameron close, embracing her in a tight hug and lowering his head to her. He felt the pain, the anger and the fear wash away in Cameron's embrace as he kissed her. Something inside him snapped and he pushed her against the wall, right underneath the shower nozzle. She felt something hard poke against her belly and knew what he wanted.

In one move John lifted Cameron up, pinned her against the wall and kissed her harder, their mouths opened and their tongues intertwined and caressed each other as he lifted her up higher, lining himself up with her. Cameron cupped his face in her hands and held him in place, enjoying kissing John with the ferocity they were as she lifted her legs up and wrapped them around his waist. He pulled back one second and looked into her eyes, holding her in place against the wall. "Are you just doing this to make me feel better?" he asked, remembering what she'd told him before. Sex didn't really do anything for her.

"Is it working?" she enquired casually with a cocked eyebrow, answering his question with another.

He couldn't help but smile as he held her up and looked at her. Her hair was soaked through and the water made her skin glisten. *She's beautiful,* he thought. Her answer mulled around in his mind; all she wanted was to protect him and make him okay. She cared nothing for herself, he realised. Her love for him was truly selfless.

"I love you," their lips mashed hard together and their tongues danced once more as John pressed his chest against her breasts, feeling her hard nipples poking into his skin as she wrapped her legs around him. John lifted her up higher and pushed into her centre, gasping at the molten heat and the memories of their night in the motel came rushing back to him.

She sighed against his mouth and stroked his back as they moved and thrust against each other. They were too busy kissing for her to tell him she loved him too, but people often said actions spoke louder than words. She sighed happily against his lips as they moved in perfect union.

The sun burned low in the sky and shone brightly down onto the desert below. Even though it was still early morning the air was

already warm, and by the afternoon would be stifling. Strong beams of light cast down onto the small safehouse in the Mojave, filtered through the thin, cheap, dated curtains of Sarah's window and lit up the room, casting a bright, warm glow against the walls. Patches where the material of the curtains had worn thin or been eaten by moths caused the sun's rays to cast patterns on the wall, which moved as they swayed slightly in the gentle breeze from the open window.

All of this was lost on Sarah, however. If the weather had suddenly changed to a thundering storm she'd have barely noticed, so intent she was on the task at hand. Her stomach burned terribly and every muscle in her abdomen ached, trembled and threatened to fail as she pulled herself up, straining hard. *Only inches to go...*

Her elbows touched her bent knees and she exhaled deeply in relief as her stomach relaxed and she collapsed back down onto the floor, the fifth set of fifty sit ups complete. She lay on the floor and felt the sun on her face as she breathed deeply and slowly, recovering from her morning workout. Sit ups, press-ups, dips and squats had left her whole body burning, but she felt good. Except for her parched mouth and throat.

"Water," she said to herself as she rolled onto her front and pushed herself upright. She got to her feet and stepped out of her room, instantly hearing the shower running off to her left. She was curious as to who else would be up at this time; it wasn't even six a.m. yet and John normally slept in late, so it couldn't be him. She ignored it and turned right into the kitchen, where she opened the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of water, unscrewing the cap and lifting it to her lips. They didn't have a refrigerator, only a larder, so the water was lukewarm, but it did the job anyway and helped quench her thirst.

She turned out of the kitchen and headed back towards her room. She'd start on breakfast soon later; thinking he'd want to have a decent meal when he got up. Normally he'd skip breakfast as most

teenagers did, but after seeing him tear last night's dinner in record time she didn't doubt he'd be ready and waiting for any meal going.

As Sarah stepped through the passage she realised the shower had stopped. The doorknob turned and opened, and the door opened inwards to reveal Cameron, wearing only a towel wrapped around her that barely concealed the top of her breasts and ran down only a few inches below her crotch. Her hair was wet and her skin pink from the hot water, and a few droplets still clung onto her here and there.

"You should probably cover up before someone sees you," Sarah told her as Cameron stepped out of the bathroom, followed a second later by... *"John?"* Her son stepped out beside Cameron, his hair also wet, skin just as flushed, and leaving no doubt that they'd both showered together, and she had a feeling that it hadn't been so save water.

"What the hell?" she glared at John and then at Cameron, feeling her already intense animosity towards the machine ratchet up to another level. "John how could you be so stupid?" she shook her head. This couldn't be happening; she knew her son had feelings for the machine but to have actually had sex with it: to her that was like falling in love with a farm animal or a pet, and sleeping with that. Less, even, as Cameron wasn't actually alive. He might as well have screwed the toaster.

"He's not stupid," Cameron started to reply. John put his hand on her shoulder, halting her, and calmly stepped forward, stopping when he was beside her. He took her hand in his and laced their fingers together, catching his mom's eyes as she looked down at their entwined digits.

"I'll handle it," he said to her. He turned to Sarah and looked at her evenly. "You know I love Cameron." He knew his mom was pretty switched on; she'd have known all along, surely, he thought.

"You're a teenager, John; you don't know what love is."

The look he gave her back was so cold it could have frozen the sun, and it chilled Sarah to the bone. "So what was it when you were with Kyle?" John asked, his eyes narrowing. "'In the few hours we had together, we loved a lifetime's worth.' A few *hours* – a day and a half at most: I was in the future for three months, looking for Cameron: you tell me which one's love and which isn't." He stared at his mom, challenging her for an answer. He'd been through hell to get Cameron back and he wasn't going to shy away from why he did it now.

Sarah tried to say something, to make a reply, but she was dumbstruck. It stung her badly to hear him all but say that what she'd had with Kyle wasn't love. To her it was; the only man she'd ever loved, and his father to boot. Comparing what she'd had with Kyle to what he'd done with the machine added insult to injury.

"She can't love you back," Sarah finally settled on.

"I do," Cameron insisted.

"Because you're programmed to," Sarah argued back. "You'd die for John because that's your job."

Cameron shook her head, disagreeing vehemently. She'd learnt a lot about herself recently and her discussion with John last night had made her realise that Sarah was extremely wrong. "I haven't been programmed to protect John since his sixteenth birthday. I love John and he loves me; your opinion's irrelevant."

"She's right, Mom," John added, still holding her hand for emphasis. "I don't need your permission, I love Cameron and nothing's going to change that." He stopped, realising how harsh he sounded now. He'd made his point, and he didn't want to be at odds with his mom; he'd missed her when he'd gone to the future and he didn't want to lose her again. "But I hope you'll accept it," he said. "One day."

Sarah looked to her son, then at Cameron. She could see a trace of possessiveness in the cyborg; how she clutched onto John's hand,

not hard, but she could tell that Cameron wasn't going to let go. She'd seen how close they were, before and after John's jump to the future, and when she thought about it, she knew how futile it was trying to talk John out of it: he'd risked life, limb, and the fate of the entire world to find her in the future. She'd never liked how close he'd been to her, how he responded to Cameron, but clearly at some point things had developed even further between them and the bond was now unbreakable.

"Maybe one day," she sighed, resigned. God, she groaned inwardly: how she hated the cyborg; she certainly didn't want Cameron as a proverbial daughter in law, but she could see she really had no choice. It was like it or lump it, and she wasn't going to lose John again. If she had to play it his way, so be it. She'd try to for him, but she'd never, ever like it. "I don't want it thrown in my face," she said to both of them. "You keep the physical stuff behind closed doors."

"We can do that," Cameron said amicably. She didn't care if Sarah disapproved, but she knew that John wanted his mother's acceptance. It was unlikely he'd ever receive it.

"And put some clothes on," Sarah snapped, regaining a semblance of authority again. "I don't want Savannah coming out here and seeing you two naked!"

"Or Danny," John couldn't help saying. "I don't think he's seen a naked girl before."

"I doubt it," Cameron agreed.

"That makes three of us," Sarah said, "so get dressed before that changes and he has a heart attack." John nodded and led Cameron back into their room, and Sarah went back to hers and sat hunched on the edge of her bed. She took out her Glock, pulled out the magazine and ejected the chambered round. She quickly disassembled it and started to clean it, finding the routine and the smell of the oil she used to lubricate the working parts therapeutic; they helped her to put the ugly sight of her son and Cameron

together out of her mind, almost. Why couldn't John fall for a proper girl? She knew the answer to that: no normal girl could share his life, now or ever. Even if they stopped it all they'd be on the run and John could never reveal who he really was, couldn't talk about his past with anyone.

She pulled the topslide off and started to clear dust out of it, and threaded a cloth through the barrel. The worst part about it all was that when she thought about John, with cold, hard logic, then Cameron was his best bet: there was no need to pretend he was just a normal guy with her. She was a part of their struggle against Skynet. She'd never leave him for another guy, never cheat on him, never break his heart and she'd always be there for him. When she really thought about it Cameron was the perfect companion for John, and it made her sick to her stomach just thinking about it.

"Un-fucking-believable," she muttered. It was times like this, even years since she'd quit smoking, that she'd give her right arm for a cigarette, and a drink; a *big drink* .

The smell of cooking beans and sausages wafted through the small kitchen and the aroma teased John's senses as he automatically started to salivate. Cameron stood at the small gas oven and stirred a saucepan. The beans, sausages, and tomatoes were all tinned but he didn't care; he was happy just to eat whatever was put in front of him, and Cameron was happy to cook it for him. When she deemed it ready she spooned the food onto a plate and walked over to the table, placing it in front of John and running her hand over his shoulders as she passed by him and took a seat at his right.

John instantly grabbed his knife and fork and started in on it, shovelling the food into his mouth with vigour. He'd built up an appetite this morning, he grinned inwardly. "Thanks," he smiled to Cameron. Not just for the food, he thought. He'd been falling apart this morning and she'd put him back together. She gave a small,

subtle smile back and her eyes brightened for a moment as she met his gaze. Seeing his smile made her immensely satisfied; all she wanted was for him to be safe and happy. His smile faded when he turned to Ellison and Savannah sat opposite.

"So you've got to do this job for Malenkov, and then he tells you what he knows about Knowles?" John asked. He'd hardly believed it when Ellison had told him he and Savannah had to split off from the rest of them and head back into LA. He didn't know what to think of this Malenkov guy; Ellison knew him but although John had trusted Ellison in the future, he didn't know this arms dealer. He'd met plenty as a kid though; and they'd all been bastards to the extreme. They generally weren't to be trusted. "What's the job?"

"We don't know," Savannah said warily, between mouthfuls of her own sausage and beans. She'd come into the kitchen when Cameron had been cooking John's breakfast. Cameron had offered to make some for her when she'd finished but Savannah didn't have the patience to wait; she'd opened up a can of all day breakfast and dug into it cold. Admittedly she hadn't been too happy when Ellison had told her Malenkov wanted her to do the job today, but she didn't see any other choice.

"And you're happy with this?" John asked her. "A blind commitment to a random job?"

Savannah shrugged and ate another forkful of sausage and beans. Malenkov had said it wasn't anything sexual and she'd hold him to that. "If it gets us one step closer to Skynet," she replied. "That's gotta be worth whatever the job is."

"I don't like it," Sarah said as she entered the room, went straight to the coffee maker and poured herself a mug. She remained standing up and leaned against the wall, staring at Cameron out the corner of her eye. She'd said to John she'd try and tolerate it, but she'd make no secret that she didn't like what was going on.

"I don't either," Cameron added, agreeing with Sarah. "He might be lying." If he was then she knew how to deal with him.

"He's never once lied to me," Ellison shook his head and sipped his own coffee. He hadn't bothered with breakfast, not feeling particularly hungry. He turned to Sarah. "He could have screwed us over with the weapons but he didn't."

"He's an arms dealer," Sarah shot back. "A criminal; not exactly the kind of guy we should trust."

"And we're terrorists," John said to her. At least, they were according to the government. "We're right up there with Bin Laden now, minus the beard." He wasn't happy abut relying on someone else, someone he didn't know, but he'd trusted Ellison in the future and he'd do the same now. There was another consideration he'd thought of but hadn't mentioned yet. "He's an international arms dealer; if we can't stop Judgement Day then we can at least make sure we're stocked up with enough weapons to fight back. We might need him."

"He could be an important ally," Cameron agreed.

"So you agree with us now?" Savannah asked him.

John nodded. "You sold me," he said. "Go and meet him, see what the job is. If it's too dangerous don't take it," he told her. Whatever Malenkov had had better be worth it, he thought. He turned to his mom, sipping coffee out of her mug. "I need you to stay here with Savannah; Cameron and I are gonna run an errand with Danny."

"Sure," Sarah shrugged nonchalantly, though inside she found herself confused as to what was going on here. Ellison and Savannah were going on an unknown mission to secure a very vague potential lead; John and Cameron were taking Danny somewhere, and she'd been demoted to a stay at home mom whilst others did the fighting on the front line. She'd started to accept that John was now running the show, but now she found herself as just the tea lady, and she didn't like it one bit.

Knowles stepped into the store and let the door swing closed behind him. A small bell on the top of the door chimed as it closed, announcing his entry into the small establishment. He glanced around and saw rows upon rows of rifles and shotguns lining the walls, secured on wooden shelves. He approached one shelf and peered at the various weapons in front of him, glancing over a variety of shotguns and hunting rifles.

He'd been driving aimlessly when he'd decided on his next course of action; he was going to go back to Kaliba and smash their AI to pieces, but there was only one thing – two things, he corrected himself – standing in the way: Baldy and Steroids. Both of them were cyborgs and from what he'd read about the latter's raid on the police station in 1984, they'd both be tough and armoured. He didn't know if the 5.56mm in his HK-G36 would be enough or not; the problem was he knew so little about these things and he had no way of making contact with Sarah Connor to find out.

"Can I help you?" A short, grey haired man in jeans and a pale blue shirt stepped out from the counter and approached him. "What're you looking for: home defence or hunting?"

The question caught him off guard; what kind of weapon did he really want? Ideally an Abrams tank but he doubted the old guy had one of those out back. He'd driven to Nevada because he couldn't get a weapon in California without having to wait for ten days whilst he was put through background checks, which would undoubtedly flag him up on Skynet's radar. Whereas in Nevada he could buy a weapon and walk out the store with it, no questions asked. He looked around the store and thought about it for a moment. Chances were pissy little NATO rounds wouldn't do much, nor would buckshot or handgun rounds. "Hunting," Knowles replied. He didn't know what would kill these cyborgs but he knew from reading that they wouldn't go down easy.

The attendant pushed his glasses up further on his nose and nodded knowingly. He pulled a shotgun off the rack and held it in front of him. "Winchester 1300: twelve gauge, takes seven rounds and it's one of the fastest cycling pump action shotguns there is." He handed it to Knowles, who took it, pumped the slide and dry-fired the weapon, earning a satisfying *click* as he pulled the trigger. He pretended to admire the polished wooden finish on the thing, but really his thoughts weren't on the aesthetics or even on the weapon itself anymore. He'd spotted something better.

He put the Winchester down and stepped up to a rack of rifles. He pulled out a polished M1 Garand rifle. This'd be a hell of a lot better, he thought. He knew the M1 was in the 7.62mm range; it'd do a lot better than his G-36. "Is this three-oh-eight or aught-six?"

"Aught-six," he replied. "You interested?"

"How much?" Knowles asked eagerly, fingering the weapon. He pulled it to his shoulder and looked down the barrel. *This could do,* he gave a slight grin.

"Eight-fifty," the owner said.

"Done," Knowles agreed. He turned back to the shotgun again, figuring the more weapons the better. "What about ammo?" he asked. He didn't know much about shotguns or hunting rifles, and had no idea about their ammunition. Though he reckoned buckshot would be like a peashooter against the machines. He wanted something that might stand a chance of punching a hole through the bastards.

"What animal are you hunting?"

For a second Knowles was tempted to say 'light armoured vehicle' and see what the guy would recommend, but refrained from it. He had to think about the machines he was going to put himself up against, even though he had no clue what could do it he had to come

up with something. "Big game," he said. "Biggest you can imagine: Bison, elk..."

"Forget buckshot then," the attendant replied. He carried the Winchester to the counter and pulled out a box of shells, opening it and taking one out. "Solid steel slugs; this'll take down whatever you shoot it at."

I hope so, Knowles thought to himself. The game in question was bigger than the old man could imagine. "I'll take it," he nodded at the Winchester. "How many slugs are in a box?"

"Ten."

"Give me five boxes," he said to the clerk. He had half a dozen mags of 5.56mm; if that, plus the aught-sixes and fifty rounds of these didn't do the trick then chances were nothing on the civilian market would. *What I wouldn't give for a proper machine gun,* he thought.

"Anything else?" the attendant asked. Knowles looked around at the handgun selection, wondering if it was really worth it. Police-issue 9mm, buckshot and 5.56mm had done fuck all to Steroids, according to the reports from 1984, so would anything else really work?

He decided against it; chances were pistols would be useless. He'd stick with what he had and just hope it'd work. "Hundred rounds of aught-six," he said. The old guy pulled the boxes of ammunition from the shelf behind him and put them into a bag. He told him how much it all cost but he didn't really listen; Knowles just handed his credit card over and automatically entered his pin. Moments later he mumbled thanks walked out the store with his brand new guns and the boxes of ammunition, put them all in the car with his bag containing the assault rifle and drove off, heading west back towards California. He had the weapons, the ammunition; all he needed now was a plan of action.

The home of Sasha Malenkov, Savannah thought as she and Ellison approached the front door, must be one of the most secure locations outside of the military. A large mansion in a gated community in Beverly Hills, it was part palace, part fortress. They'd had to be cleared by one of his bodyguards who'd been waiting for them at the entrance, and then they'd been driven through the affluent private neighbourhood to his home, past immaculate, huge houses that she thought must belong to movie stars and singers and the like. The house itself was surrounded by a ten-foot high wall there was nothing but flat, well kept grass between it and the house, ensuring anyone who did manage to scale the wall would have no cover on their approach. She saw motion sensors on the walls of the house that would be linked to lights, illuminating anyone who did approach at night, and chances were, she thought, that it also connected to an alarm system.

"This place must have cost a fortune," she said in awe at the place. Behind it was a large back garden and she could see the edge of a swimming pool behind the house.

"Four-point-two million dollars," the bodyguard replied in a heavy Slavic accent. Unlike the previous goons they'd met, however, this man looked like he spent a lot of his time in the gym and sunbathing, and had characteristically Slavic high chiselled cheekbones and shoulder length, slicked back hair.

"Nice if you can afford it," she said.

"You used to live in a place like this," Ellison commented. In fact, Catherine Weaver's house made Malenkov's appear humble in comparison.

"Yeah, but that was so long ago I barely remember it," she replied. At the front of the house was a black limousine with darkened windows at the rear of the vehicle.

The bodyguard opened the front door and ushered them inside. The interior was just as opulent as the outside; marble floors, polished

oak furniture and gilding. They passed a pair of men in suits, with a bulge sticking out under their jackets hinting that they were both armed. Ellison wondered how many men Malenkov had in his security detail; he was better protected than the leaders of some small countries. One thing Ellison noted was that they'd not been searched like they had been previously. Not that he needed to, he thought. Even if they'd been armed to the teeth they'd never successfully attack anyone here and get out alive. It'd be a good safehouse, he thought.

"Welcome," Malenkov boomed from the top of a polished wooden staircase. He came down to greet them and led them into his living room. A sixty-inch LCD TV hung up on one wall but it was off and the screen blank, and dominating the room was a large, leather corner sofa opposite the TV. "Please, sit," Malenkov gestured to the sofa, and the pair of them sat down and sank into the soft cushions. Malenkov sat on the other side and faced them. "Would you like anything to drink?" he asked them politely.

"We won't be here long enough for that," Savannah said curtly. She wanted to just get on with this so she could do the job and get the information they needed.

"We're on a tight schedule," Ellison said a bit more diplomatically.

"Fair enough," he shrugged and turned to the bodyguard. "That will be all, Nikolai." The bodyguard left the room and closed the door behind him, leaving the three of them in privacy. "I don't normally have guests at my home," he told them, "better to keep work and home separate." What he really meant, Ellison knew, was that he didn't want to keep an arsenal of offensive weapons in his home. Chances were his children had little to no idea what he did for a living, and he probably wanted to keep it that way.

"It's a very nice home," Ellison said.

"Thank you," he smiled back.

"I take it business is doing well?"

"That's why I asked you here," Malenkov replied. He pulled out a photograph and placed it on a dark oak coffee table between them. The photo showed a man in his fifties with lined, tanned skin, long dark hair tied into a ponytail, and dark, vengeful eyes. "This man," he said, "is giving me many headaches."

"Who is he?" Savannah asked.

"His name is Kevin Westinghouse: he was an associate of mine, until he decided to set up his own business. The CIA suspect he's been supplying the Taliban and Al Qaeda, but have no proof. Last month he ambushed one of my shipments, killed three of my men and stole my merchandise. You're probably aware, James, that I'm not as straight an arrow as you; in my business you have to be ruthless to survive."

Ellison's eyes widened in realisation as Malenkov spoke. "You want Savannah to kill him," he said, shaking his head. "We're not hit men." Savannah said nothing but she wasn't too happy about being turned into a hired gun. She'd spent her whole life fighting and now she wanted to put all that behind her and start again with a clean slate.

"Not *kill"* Malenkov insisted. "This is not simply revenge; he has something of mine I want back. I want you to bring him to me."

That didn't make Ellison any more relieved; he knew that behind his refined, polite exterior was a ruthless, lethal bastard who still dealt in illegal arms and likely other criminal activities the government were happy to ignore in exchange for his services: he knew full well what would happen to the man if they captured him and brought him to Malenkov.

"Why can't you do it?" Savannah asked. "You've got plenty of guys here." She'd seen three and guessed he had plenty more where that came from.

"He's very well protected," Malenkov told her. "He always travels with bodyguards in his car and more men in a second behind him. It's far more difficult to capture a man than kill him."

"What is it exactly he's got that's so important?" Ellison asked.

"That, I'm afraid James, is a secret."

"If your own guys can't do it what makes you think I'll be able to?" Savannah asked.

The Ukrainian smiled knowingly. "Westinghouse is clever, and very slippery, but he has one weakness: women. And you're very attractive. He has a penchant for high class escorts, which he regularly indulges, and I want you to replace one of them so you'll be alone with him." Malenkov placed a small black plastic case on the table and opened it. Inside was a small glass vial containing a clear liquid and sealed with a foil top, like on the old milk bottles, Ellison noted.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Sodium thiopentathol," Malenkov explained. Next to the vial was a small, pen-like auto injector. "Insert it into the injector and stab him with it – leg or backside is best if you can – and it automatically injects the mix into his bloodstream. It should take ten to fifteen seconds to either render him unconscious, or at least render him paralytic. When you have him, bring him back to the warehouse, and I will tell you what you want to know in return."

A frown furrowed Ellison's brow as he listened to Malenkov. He really didn't like this; he'd known that whatever favour the man would ask for wouldn't exactly be above board, but he was putting Savannah at extreme risk to do his dirty work.

"One condition," Savannah said, leaning forwards in the sofa. "We need more weapons." Most what Ellison and Sarah had bought from him was now buried underground, and retrieving it would be difficult

and dangerous. "Grenade launchers, rockets, Semtex, and anything that fires armour piercing rounds."

"Done," Malenkov nodded his agreement. "He's hired an escort for tonight and is meeting her for a drink at a hotel in West Hollywood, I need you to intercept her and take her place." He stood up, indicating their meeting was over. "Nikolai will see you outside and give you the details," he said.

"When do we get the information you promised us?" Ellison asked as he and Savannah stood up and opened the door, stepping outside of the living room.

"I'll contact you later tonight; once the job is done I'll tell you what I know."

"You'd better," Savannah told him. If he double crossed them then she'd use her 'considerable skills' as he put it, to make him regret it. Ellison might trust his word but until he delivered the information on him she wouldn't. Ellison followed her out, pulled out the cell phone Sarah had given her and started to dial John's number; he wouldn't be happy about what the job was but they had no choice.

Chapter 28

Ahoy hoy! I hope you're all enjoying the story so far. I had a number of reviews and PMs from readers who were surprised at Sarah's reaction int the last chapter, that she didn't explode or anything. I think that would be out of character for Sarah, really. She knew John was attached to Cameron, and she let him go to the future without trying to stop him. Knowing he went as far as he did for her, she knew deep down that he was in love with Cameron. The main shock would have been seeing it, literally "in the flesh" as it were. But I think that Sarah exploding has been done a lot in fics so it's become expected.

Anyway; here's chapter 28. I hope you all enjoy, and please do leave me some feedback.

"We're here," Cameron said as she pulled up alongside a large white house surrounded by open ground. She'd been here before only once, and John twice: the first time to stop his mother killing an innocent man, and the second time was, unsuccessfully, for information. They hadn't been welcome on either occasion.

"You're letting me go?" Danny stared out his back seat window at his house; he hadn't been there in months, strictly forbidden from making contact with his mother or from going anywhere unescorted, even in his weeks off back in the world. Knowles had been an almost constant presence, like his own shadow, and the two had even been forced to share twin hotel rooms paid for by Kaliba. The thought of sleeping in his own bed, and more importantly, seeing his mom and sister again, was almost too much.

"There's no point in keeping you anymore," John looked back from the front passenger seat at him. "You told us the truth; we're letting you go: that was the deal."

Danny looked at him and Cameron, slightly stunned. "I didn't think you'd honour it," he said quietly. He'd been half expecting them to shoot him and dump his body out in the desert or something.

"I told you: we're not the bad guys," John said.

"Unless you tell the police or Kaliba about us," Cameron added threateningly. "If you do I'll kill you."

Danny unconsciously gulped, nervous and terrified of Cameron. He didn't doubt for a second she meant it; she could kill him easily without any effort, or any feeling even. He'd thought Knowles was a cold, hard bastard; he was a sweetheart compared to her. "I won't," Danny replied, shaking his head. "I'm not going back to Kaliba. I'll get a job at Microsoft or something."

"Just don't ever try to build an AI again," John said. A thought suddenly came to him and he opened his door and stepped out.

"What are you doing?" Cameron glanced at him, curious. They were supposed to drop off Danny and leave. She got out and looked to him across the roof of the car, as Danny also exited the Lexus.

"I think Tarissa deserves an explanation," he replied. He stepped towards the front door as Cameron and Danny followed suit. He rang the bell waited. He heard movement inside as someone approached the door and a moment later catches and locks clicked open. The door opened and Tarissa's face appeared. She looked older, much older, and haggard; her hair was a mess and she had bags under her eyes. She stared at John and it took a moment to recognise him.

"You!" She glared at him in barely concealed hatred and tried to slam the door shut, but John wedged his boot in the door and pushed it open. "What do you want?" she snapped, but as the door swung

around she saw the machine and... *"Danny?"* Her knees almost buckled beneath her at the sight of her son and she trembled, tears already forming in her eyes.

"It's me, mom," Danny pushed past John and threw his arms around his mother, pulling her into a hug. He could feel her sobbing into him and it was all he could do not to join in.

"Where have you been?" she looked up at him, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You said you had a job and then you disappeared." She turned to John and Cameron. "You did this," she accused them. "You got him caught up in all of it, just like his father."

John shook his head, though he doubted she'd believe anything he said. "W

Actually we found him by accident," he told her, remembering how Ellison had told him in the future that he and his mom had found him when they'd been sneaking through Zeiracorp.

Danny stepped back from Tarissa for a moment and his mom led them all inside. She took them into their living room and sat down on the couch next to her son. John and Cameron took a sofa opposite. He started to say something but Danny cut him off.

"I took a job with a company called Kaliba. They wanted me to build an AI, so I did. They flew us – me and a team of other computer scientists and engineers – somewhere in the mountains, middle of nowhere, and we went to work. We spent two weeks at work and another week back on leave."

"And you didn't think to call me?" Tarissa asked angrily. "I was worried sick, Danny. I called the police, hired private detectives..."

"I *wasn't allowed* to call home," Danny protested, "or speak to anyone I knew. They took our cell phones and everything. No contact with friends or family until the job was done. There were no phones in the labs we worked in and restricted internet access. Even

on leave I had a minder, making sure I didn't break the rules." He'd tried a few times; public payphones, internet cafe... Knowles had stuck to him like glue.

"They didn't want him to learn the truth," Cameron explained.

Tarissa's eyes narrowed as she looked at Cameron, not what she was – she knew that – but for what she said. Her words resonated through her mind and images of Miles flashed up. "What truth?" she asked, fairly sure what she meant but hoping beyond anything she was wrong.

"They're starting it all again," John said. "Trying to blow up the world, create Skynet and wipe us all out."

"Why?" she asked. That was the one thing she didn't get, was the motives behind it all. "If these are people, why are they doing it?"

"Greys," Cameron answered. "People who sided with Skynet in the future. They work for the machines so Skynet won't kill them. They don't think we can win: they serve Skynet, believing it will spare them when it wins. It won't." She knew well that if Skynet had won the war it would kill the humans who'd allied with it. They were useless to it and a potential liability.

"They're digging all our graves so they can join what they see as the winning side. Danny fell into the same trap as his father; unwittingly helping the machines."

The younger Dyson shook his head adamantly. "I told you; I'm not going back to them."

It wasn't as simple as that, and both John and Cameron knew it. "The AI you built is self aware already," Cameron said. "They're waiting for the infrastructure so Skynet can control strategic assets."

"In English?" Tarissa asked.

"Nukes," John said. "It's waiting for the military to give it control of the nukes and unmanned drones, and then it'll attack. We're trying to stop it."

Dread filled Tarissa as she remembered the exact same thing happening with Miles: he'd joined them last time around and gotten himself killed, and that *still* hadn't stopped it all. "You're not taking Danny," she wrapped her arms protectively around him.

"We don't plan to," John said. "We came here to drop him off. He's done everything he can for us; we've got to do the rest ourselves."

"But you can't stay here," Cameron told her. "Kaliba might expect you to come home," she said to Danny. "You need to leave. Somewhere safe."

"Mexico," John said, remembering Savannah's tale, how she and Ellison had hidden out there. "Stay remote; no computers, no cell phones: off the grid." His pocket vibrated against his upper thigh and he pulled out his cell phone, ringing on silent. "That's our cue to leave," he told Cameron as he made his way towards the front door. "Take care of yourself, Danny."

Cameron followed after him, not attempting any kind of farewell to Danny or his mother, leaving them to their reunion.

As soon as they were out of the front door John put the phone to his ear and pressed to answer it. "Yeah?"

"John, we've just come from Malenkov's," he recognised Ellison's voice on the line. *"He's told us the job he wants us to do."*

"What is it?" he asked, detecting an air of uneasiness in the man's tone.

"He wants Savannah to kidnap a rival arms and drug dealer, name of Westinghouse, and deliver him to his doorstep – where he'll probably be tortured and killed. Savannah's said she'll do it but I'm not happy

about it." John frowned at the reply; they weren't murderers but even if they weren't pulling the trigger they'd still be guilty by proxy.

The name meant something to Cameron, however. She gestured for John to hand her the phone. He passed it over to her, seeing the urgency on her face. "Is that Kevin Westinghouse?" she asked.

"Same one," Ellison replied.

"Do it," Cameron told him firmly. John stared at her in horror, thinking she'd learnt the value of human life by now. But he could see something going on in her head; he didn't know what but he was going to trust her on this. He took the phone back from her.

"John, do you really *want us to go ahead with this?"*

He looked to Cameron for a moment and saw the determination on her face. "Do it," John sighed. "Make sure Malenkov tells us everything he knows about Knowles." He hung up the phone and put it back in his pocket. "Why did I just tell Ellison to let Savannah capture this guy and sign his death warrant?" he asked. He trusted Cameron's judgement but he wanted to know why she wanted him dead.

"Next year Kevin Westinghouse steals classified plans for an experimental prototype directed energy weapon. Later he'll give the plans to Skynet in exchange for his own life: Skynet uses the plans as a base for plasma weaponry."

"The guy Malenkov's going to kill is a *Grey?"* John couldn't believe just how small the world was getting. What the hell were the odds of that?

"Not yet," Cameron said. "He will be."

"Wouldn't Skynet have the plans anyway?" John asked. Why would Skynet need plans from a human when it would have access to everything in the US military network.

"The plans are Japanese." Made sense, John thought. He realised now that they'd made a sound move: even if they couldn't prevent the war, with Westinghouse out of the picture Skynet's development of plasma weapons could be delayed, meaning the HKs and Centaurs in the future would have to rely on missiles and cannons, meaning they had to be constantly rearmed and resupplied; and that was a weakness they could exploit.

Danny watched John and Cameron walk out the front door, and remained rooted in the chair as it clicked shut after them. His mom said something but he didn't hear it. All he'd wanted for days was to come home, to see his mom and sister again; but now he was here it didn't feel right.

"Danny, are you listening to me?"

He snapped his head towards his mom, not realising he'd completely zoned out. "Sorry mom," he said. "What did you say?"

"I said, I'll call your sister and we'll go out for dinner tonight - I'd better call the police too and tell them to call off the search now you're back." She got up and went to the phone, hung on the wall. Danny shot up out of his seat, tore the phone from her grip and slammed it back into the cradle. Tarissa shot him a look as if he'd grown horns. "What are you doing?"

"Didn't you listen to a word they said?" Danny glared at her. "We can't call the police."

"I wasn't going to tell them anything about the Connors."

"It doesn't matter what you tell them," he stressed. It wasn't her fault; she knew nothing about AIs or what his one was capable of. "If you call the police it goes straight to the AI I built; it'll know I'm here and they'll send mercenaries after us; they've got their own private army."

"So what do we do?" Tarissa asked irritably. "The police have been looking for you, and your sister will want to know you're home and safe."

"Like John said: we hide."

"You mean we just give up our whole lives?" she couldn't do that; Blythe was in her senior year at school, she couldn't just up sticks and move like that. "For how long?"

The question struck Danny hard. If they did hide, how long would it be for? Would he have to spend his life on the run? How would he ever know if John managed to stop Skynet: would he just have to wait and see if the world blew up? Running and hiding was okay for a while, he thought. They had plenty of money; they could move to another country, create new identities, could even get new faces at a stretch, but that would really be pushing it. What kind of life would that be? He wondered: running and hiding and always looking over your shoulder. He'd have no future; everything he'd worked so hard for would be for nothing. He couldn't live like that. The only way he could see of avoiding that kind of life was to make sure he didn't have to live it, which was exactly what John was doing.

"Until I call you," he said, realising what he had to do.

"Where are you going?"

He pointed out to the front door. "With them."

"No," Tarissa said sharply and held onto him. "Your father died like that; I won't let it happen to you too."

Danny pried her hands off him and looked at her, feeling guilty about what he was going to do. "I'm sorry," he said remorsefully as he got up off the couch, strode to the front door and left. He saw the black Lexus pulling out of the drive and ran after it, waving his arms above his head to get their attention. *"Wait!"* he cried out, sprinting towards them.

The car stopped and turned so the passenger side faced him and John leaned out the open window. "Danny, go back inside."

"I can't," he said.

"It's too dangerous," John insisted.

"And I'm supposed to just run and hide? I can't, I won't: I made Skynet, *I'm responsible for all this.* Without me there'd be no Skynet." Danny knew now that he had to help them. Not working for Kaliba wasn't enough, as Cameron had said. The AI was self aware and Kaliba were making it into a machine of war. If John failed then the end of the world would be on him. He didn't want that kind of guilt.

"We don't need you," Cameron added. "Your mother does."

"You *do* need me!" he shouted at her. "You find out where they are, then what? You run around blindly in the complex whilst their private army massacres you. I can tell you where you need to go; where the AI's based, where the server farms are; the layout of the building. *I want to help."*

John stared at him for a moment and saw a resolve on his face that reminded him of when he was fifteen, after he'd met Cameron and realised it had all started again, how he'd begged for them to stop it instead of running and hiding. Danny had a point, though; without that knowledge they'd be going in blind. "Get in," he said simply. Danny opened the door behind him and got into the back seat. Cameron put her foot down on the gas and pulled away before he'd put a seatbelt on or even closed the door. She thought it was a bad idea to include Danny: she didn't think he'd inform the police or Kaliba, but in their world he was little use. He couldn't fight, didn't know how to shoot, and knew nothing about surveillance or guerrilla warfare. His knowledge of the Kaliba complex and its layout would be useful but he could give her detailed plans and she'd instantly memorise them; they didn't need him for that. She trusted John's judgement, however, like he trusted hers, and she'd support his decision.

The car drove away from the Dyson residence for a hundred yards, reminding John of the time Cromartie had chased them and the bomb in Cameron's truck that she'd used to slow him down. "Stop," he told her. Cameron pulled over again and John turned around in his seat to face Danny, his eyes boring into him. "If you're with us you're all in," he said. "No half-asses. You do what I say, when I say it. You know what we're up against; there's a very real chance none of us will make it through this: last chance to go home."

Danny said nothing for a moment, he just watched the hard, intense gaze of the younger man. John was a few years his junior but there was no way he was a boy; that much was clear. Part of him was sorely tempted to get out of the car and go back home to his mom; after months of not knowing he was alive or dead, and he'd only been home for five minutes. It wasn't fair on her but he couldn't live with himself if he didn't at least try to stop it from happening.

"I'm in," he said, hoping he sounded more sure about it than he felt. Cameron put her foot on the gas again and drove off, leaving the wealthy residential district in their dust.

John looked at Cameron and then back at Danny. He opened the glove compartment and pulled out his Sig Sauer, held it by the barrel and passed it to Danny, who looked at the weapon but was hesitant to take it.

"It's yours," John told him. "If you're with us you'll need it." Danny took the weapon from him and held it in his right hand. It was heavier than he'd thought it would be. His finger automatically curled into the trigger guard and his probed what he thought was the safety button with his thumb.

"Don't touch the trigger!" Cameron snapped at him, noting that the barrel was in John's direction and if it accidentally went off the bullet would hit him.

"Sorry," Danny said sheepishly, placing the weapon on the seat next to him, afraid to even touch the thing now.

"We'll have to show you how to use it," John realised aloud. He took the weapon, unloaded the magazine and pulled the topslide back to clear the chamber, ejecting the chambered round from the breech. He handed it back to Danny. "Play around with it," he said. "Get a feel for it. You're one of us now, and I guarantee before this is over you'll have to use it. Welcome to the team."

Analysing intrusion into US Defence Network...

Analysing...

Analysing...

Analysing...

"This is taking too long," Coleman muttered impatiently. He'd assumed an AI as sophisticated as this one would be able to find out who had hacked the defence network without any problems, but so far it had taken over a day and it still hadn't traced it yet. "Who the hell can even hack it like that? A supercomputer with brute force attacks would take years, and this thing took what, twenty seconds."

"The hack lasted eighteen-point-six seconds," Steroids corrected him. "That's very little time to run a trace; it will take time."

"Time is exactly what we don't have," Coleman shot back. He pulled out a pack of Morleys, pulled one out, put it between his lips and lit it up, taking a long drag and feeling the almost instantly soothing effect of the nicotine as it hit his bloodstream. He ignored the *no smoking* sign on the wall and Steroids' disapproving stare. He knew the cyborg cared nothing for his health or that of any other human, but he and Baldy – oh, how he loved the names that Sergeant Knowles had bestowed upon the two machines – were extremely anal about any risk to Skynet, and that included fire hazards.

He took another drag, sucking on the cigarette, before continuing. "The Connors are out there still, Danny Dyson's still missing and now Knowles has fucked off to who knows where."

"Our teams' attempts to apprehend Knowles have been unsuccessful," Nagase added. The machines couldn't be anxious, because they were machines, but also because it wasn't their asses on the line if things went wrong: they wouldn't be the ones found face down in a ditch with a bullet in their skull; he, Coleman and the others would. "His family are also missing. Surveillance of the Dyson residence has provided no clues, and the Connors have disappeared."

"They're out there," Steroids told them calmly. "Skynet will find them."

The LCD screen on the wall that Skynet used to communicate with them changed, drawing the attention of the two men and the cyborg to it.

Analysis complete...

"What did you find?" Coleman asked it. The AI had voice recognition software so he knew it understood every word he said.

The intruder is like me.

"Another one?" Nagase's eyes widened. "Is it the same one as before?"

Unknown.

That worried Coleman considerably; how could it not know if it was the same one before, but it couldn't be, surely. "The other AI's gone, along with Catherine Weaver," he said.

"Negative," Steroids argued. "Catherine Weaver's body was never recovered, and Danny Dyson reported the hostile AI was missing; it

had been downloaded to another computer. Its location is unknown."

Coleman stubbed his cigarette out onto the surface of a wooden desk in the room and immediately pulled out another. This was a day when one just wouldn't do.

The intruder is another AI, identity unknown. Data shares some similarities with missing 'John Henry' AI. I have traced the source of the intrusion into the defence network.

Well that's something, Coleman thought.

"What is their location?" Steroids asked.

A map appeared on the screen of Southern California, which zoomed into LA County and panned east. A red dot appeared on the screen and flashed continuously as a set of grid coordinates appeared in a small box above it, displaying their exact coordinates; in the desert, some distance north of Big Bear.

"That's where Zeiracorp's AI is!" Coleman shot up, almost ready to dance a jig in celebration. How the hell had it remained hidden all this time?

"We *think* its Zeiracorp's AI," Nagase reminded him. "Skynet can't tell if it's the same one or not." Though the odds of another, similar AI being out there were pretty slim.

"Wait," Steroids instructed them as he watched the screen. "There's something else."

A face appeared on the screen. A man in his fifties with light brown hair and flecks of grey at the sides, dressed in a suit. His high cheekbones gave him a Slavic appearance, and he looked like a wealthy man who kept himself in excellent condition. *Better than me,* Coleman thought. The years had been kinder to this man, whoever he was, than to him. As he smoked the Morley, he reflected that he'd probably lived a life of excess once he'd been back in the past. It

was the curse of anyone from the future, to indulge themselves after years of deprivation. "Who's this?" he asked.

Sasha Dmitri Malenkov. Age: 54. Nationality: Ukrainian. Arms dealer employed by Central Intelligence Agency. His address appeared on screen beneath his photo. *Target must be eliminated.* Another red dot revealed the location of his home and a grid reference, and one further indicator flashed on an old industrial estate in the city.

Coleman couldn't help the wolfish grin that spread across his lips. He saw it on Nagase's as well, and although Steroids never actually smiled he could imagine the T-800 was pleased to some degree. Weaver had dealt with Sarah Connor at least once, from the security images they'd procured from Zeiracorp. Her AI had been missing but Skynet had found something similar. Was this the same AI, adapted somehow, or a new one – perhaps a second attempt? It didn't matter: The location was the best lead to Weaver, the AI, and John and Sarah Connor they were going to get. They weren't about to let them slip through their grasp now.

The bar was softly lit and music played quietly in the background, providing a relaxed yet classy atmosphere to the place. At early evening it wasn't particularly busy, and there were only a few occupied tables. Ellison sat opposite Savannah at one such table in the corner of the bar, the former drinking an extortionate twelve-dollar bottle of beer and the latter with a glass of orange juice and lemonade that cost not much less. Ellison was glad the mission would be a one-off; he couldn't afford to hang out in places like this too many times, especially as he had no income now and the only money they had was what was stored under the floorboards in the safehouse.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Ellison asked her. "We can back out if you want, we'll find it out another way."

"Its fine," Savannah shrugged.

"I really don't agree with this," he added. Even if Cameron and Malenkov were right, Danny Dyson created Skynet but they hadn't just killed him. Even if they'd managed to get to him before he'd built it. "Feels like murder," he said before taking a swig of his beer.

"I know how you feel about it," Savannah said to him. "You used to always carry your bible around in the future; everywhere we went. I know what it means to you, your faith, morals and all."

"I take it you didn't agree with me?" he asked. He reckoned if he raised Savannah he'd try to instil some faith in her, something to believe in. They could all use some of that right now, he thought.

Savannah had been sipping her drink as he'd spoken and she'd almost snorted it out her nose, the idea was so funny. "Me? Hell no: Heckler and Koch did a lot more for me than *God* ever did!" She saw Ellison looking at her uncomfortably and realised she might have upset him. *I'm no good at this kinda thing,* she thought. "But I always had faith in you," she said, catching his gaze. "You never let me down."

Ellison smiled at that, feeling proud that on some level he'd helped her, even if it hadn't technically happened yet.

His attention was torn from the conversation as a striking brunette in a black dress seemed to glide through the front entrance of the bar. She looked around and he got a good look at her; she was several inches taller than Savannah, and looking at her face he could tell she was half Oriental, giving her a mysterious, exotic look. "That's her," he murmured to Savannah. She had the good sense not to turn around and look, and waited until the woman passed by before catching a glimpse out the corner of her eye.

The woman – according to Malenkov, Westinghouse's escort for the evening – looked around the bar, saw that her client wasn't yet here, and headed for the restroom. Savannah downed the rest of her

drink, waited until the escort had disappeared, got up and followed after her. "I'll just be a moment," she said to Ellison, who handed a roll of gaffer tape to her under the table.

She marched into the bathroom and saw the woman in there, standing at the sinks and touching up her makeup. She stood beside her and pretended to inspect her own face, though she had no makeup at all on hers. The escort pulled lipstick out of her purse and applied another layer of dark red onto her lips as Savannah looked on.

"Do you mind if I borrow some?" she asked.

"Sorry," the woman smiled condescendingly. "I don't share, honey. Why don't you ask the man you were with to get you some? He seemed the generous type."

"I asked nicely," Savannah shrugged nonchalantly. She slammed her elbow into the woman's chin as hard as she could, snapping her head backwards and forcing the woman to cry out. Savannah gripped the escort's wrists before she fell backwards, pulled her closer and forced her knee into her gut, knocking the wind out of her and dropping her to her knees. A roundhouse kick to the side of her head sent her sprawling to the ground unconscious.

No time at all was wasted as Savannah locked the restroom door, stripped off the escort's black dress, pulled the roll of gaffer tape from her pocket and set to work. She dragged her unconscious burden into one of the cubicles and wrapped the tape around the fingers on each of her hands, binding them together until they resembled fins more than anything else. It would render her fingers useless in trying to pick the rest of the tape and free herself, should she regain consciousness too soon. Next she bound her wrists together around the base of the porcelain toilet bowl, wrapping it around several times to ensure it would hold her securely in place. Next she ripped a length of tape off and sealed the woman's mouth shut. She tied her legs together at the ankles, too.

Savannah stood up and admired her handiwork; the escort was unconscious, in lacy black underwear and tied to a toilet; not the night out she'd expected to have. Savannah then closed the cubicle door, pulled a three inch blade from her pocket and wedged it into the thin slot of the bolt, twisting it to lock the door shut. She stripped herself, taking off her t shirt, combats and boots until she was in her underwear, and put on the other woman's black dress.

After some effort trying to zip up the back herself she turned her attention to the escort's handbag. She pulled the purse out and checked the driving licence. *Chardonnay Elizabeth McLaren-Jones, age twenty-eight.* "Chardonnay?" Savannah couldn't resist a chuckle. She knew her own name was unusual but what who the hell was named after a fucking wine?

She took out a small brush and ran it through her hair a few times, making sure it was straight and neat. Next she decided some makeup wouldn't go amiss. She applied some lipstick albeit with an unsteady hand and much difficulty. Her hand slipped and she ended up with a crimson streak going up towards her nose. "Shit!" She went into another cubicle, took out some toilet paper, ran it under the tap and used it to wipe it off and try again.

The second attempt was more successful and she managed to apply a crimson sheen to her lips that glossed. She decided against anything more elaborate like mascara, knowing she'd only screw it up, and instead sprayed some of her cologne on herself. She looked in the mirror and inspected herself. The dress was slightly too long, and looked baggy in the chest – the escort being more endowed in that region than she was. "I look ridiculous," she grumbled. Why people dressed like this she didn't know. She was more than happy to wear combats and boots: something practical; why wear something you're not comfortable in? She thought.

Unhappy with how she looked in the dress but satisfied she couldn't do anything more, she took the handbag, threw the licence away and replaced it with the injector Malenkov had given her. She'd already slotted the vial into it and all she needed to do was jab it into him and

it would do the rest. She went back into the bar, leaving the unconscious escort taped up and tied to the toilet. She spotted Ellison still sat at the bar and nursing his beer, but she ignored him and sat down on her own at the bar.

The front entrance opened again and Savannah saw the target coming in. Kevin Westinghouse was dressed in a crisp blue suit, silk shirt and even from a distance he absolutely reeked of money. He was followed by two large, burly men in cheaper suits, who remained several feet behind. She got up and stepped towards him, offering her hand. "Mr Westinghouse?" she smiled.

"What's this?" he frowned at her. "I'd booked Chardonnay; where is she?"

"She had a last minute emergency," Savannah said, thinking quickly. "And they asked me to cover. She smiled seductively. "I hope you don't mind, I can make it up to you," she stroked his shoulder.

Westinghouse looked her up and down, inspecting her and trying to decide if he would go ahead or not. He didn't like surprises or people changing plans at the last minute. "Sure," he decided. He'd had a shitty day and even though she wasn't Chardonnay, she was still very attractive, though a little more effort with her appearance wouldn't have gone amiss. She looked like she'd been called up at literally the very last minute, and had been dressed by a blind man. "Half the rate I'd have paid for Chardonnay," he said, still not too happy that his evening had been altered and he hadn't even been told about it.

"Half's fine," Savannah said, still pretending to smile. This guy annoyed her already. Just like the assholes who'd taken advantage of her when she'd been a teenager. She knew it was going to take a supreme act of will to keep up the charade. Fuck it, she thought; she'd done it before, only for drugs and booze, she could pretend to do it again, at least until she got him alone anyway.

He seemed to relax and took a seat next to her at the bar. The two goons sat at a table behind them and chatted quietly to each other. Westinghouse got the attention of a barman and ordered a double-scotch. "What're you having?" he asked Savannah.

"I don't really drink," she replied. The frown on his face made her realise she'd made some kind of mistake already. She didn't want to have a drink because she didn't want to end up getting drunk and ruining the job. They only had one shot at this and she didn't want to mess it up.

"Medium white," he told the barman, ordering for her.

"Coming up," he replied, rushing to get a glass. A glass of scotch and a white wine were placed in front of them and the barman left them to it.

"So, what do you do?" Savannah asked him.

"Imports and exports," Westinghouse told her.

"What kind of things?" she continued, pretending to be interested.

"Whatever people need," he replied cryptically.

"Sounds exciting. Tell me about it," Savannah kept her eyes glued to him but when he took a sip of his drink she cast a quick glance to Ellison, who was sipping his beer still and subtly watching her.

"Let's just say I give people what they want."

Another coy false smile beamed from Savannah's face as she traced her forefinger up and down his arm. "I bet you're *really* good at that," she said. "Tell me more."

"I don't really like to talk about work," Westinghouse told her. "I'm here for pleasure, not business."

"I know just what you mean," she said, a devilish, seductive grin on her lips. She smiled coyly as she took a small sip of the wine. *I deserve a fucking Oscar,* she thought to herself. "Shall we go back to yours?" she figured he'd known exactly what kind of evening he was going to have with Chardonnay, and the drinks and conversation were only a cursory beginning.

A sly grin spread across Westinghouse's mouth and he nodded. "You're very forward; Chardonnay and I usually have a few drinks first, take it slow and enjoy ourselves."

"Let's just say that I like to get straight to the main course," she said suggestively. He nodded again and took her hand as he stood up. He looked at his two bodyguard and nodded. They returned the gesture and he led Savannah away from the bar, but not out the front entrance. The bar was in a hotel, and he led her towards the staircase going up to the rooms.

Shit! That wasn't part of their plan. She cast a look at Ellison and screamed inside her head to abort and get out. They were meant to take him out discretely; how were they going to get rid of the body from a busy hotel? She let him lead her up the stairs to the first floor, where they went down a corridor and he stopped outside a room. She noted the number: *107,* and memorised it. It was going wrong already; the only plus side was his goons had stayed put in the bar.

Westinghouse opened the door for her and allowed her to go in first. She nervously stepped into the room and immediately knew something wasn't right. After years living in hiding from the machines, having to be extra careful to avoid them and, more importantly – see and hear them coming even in the dark; her senses had been fine tuned, and she could tell someone else was already in the room with her. She heard breathing coming from further in even though it was so dark she saw nothing.

A pair of hands roughly shoved her into the room from behind and she quickly regained her footing, but not before Westinghouse had turned the light on and closed the door behind her. Now the room

was lit up she saw she'd been right; a large man with a balding head and crooked nose stared at her from a chair as he got up and approached.

A fist slammed into the back of her head and Savannah stumbled forwards, dazed for a second, before she turned round and launched a punch of her own into the man's face, but the balding gorilla grabbed her from behind and pinned her arms up. "Fuck off!" she smacked the back of her head against his nose and felt warm blood spray on her hair as well as a crunch of snapping cartilage. His grip loosened but not enough for her to free herself before Westinghouse kicked her hard in the stomach and she sagged to the ground with the wind knocked out of her.

He flipped her onto her back and punched her in the face twice, stunning her and spattering blood from her lips onto the carpet as the inside of her mouth was cut by her teeth. He sat on her chest and used his knees to pin her shoulders and arms to the ground. "Who the fuck are you?" he snapped angrily at Savannah, looking down at her with merciless eyes. "Chardonnay cancels at the last minute – something she hasn't done once in two years – then you show up, dressed like crap and *clearly* not sent from the agency: so, who are you?"

Savannah said nothing and simply spat up into his face. He wiped the globule off with the back of his hand and simply transferred it back onto her face as he dug his fingers into her cheeks with his other hand, holding her head down. He turned to the other man. "Check her bag," he ordered him.

The larger man rummaged through and quickly found the case, which he opened to reveal the sodium thiopentathol in the injector. Westinghouse nodded in understanding and turned back to Savannah. "That's for me I take it," he said. "Who are you working for?"

Still, Savannah made no reply, but that didn't matter a jot to him. Not yet. With one nod from him, his associate handed him the injector,

and he jabbed it into the meat of her thigh. She winced as the needle penetrated the skin and muscle of her leg and a cold rush ran through her thigh as the powerful barbiturates coursed their way through her. She tried to push back and fight against them, free herself, but all her strength abandoned her and she couldn't break his grip. Within seconds she couldn't even summon up the will to try, she just lay there on the floor as the world spun around her. She was spinning, floating up, and everything went blurry and faded to blackness.

"Can I get you another, sir?" a barmaid in a pressed blouse and waistcoat asked Ellison as she picked up his empty bottle of beer.

"No thank you," he said, not really wanting to pay the daylight robbery prices they were charging, nor wanting to slow his reactions in any way or distract himself. "I'm just waiting for a friend."

"The woman with the long red hair?" she asked. "She left just a minute ago with another gentleman; don't think the poor thing can handle her drink, she looked out of it."

Her words slapped Ellison hard in the face and his heart almost skipped a beat as the blood drained from his face. "Which way did she go?" he asked, looking to the front entrance; he hadn't seen them leave via the bar.

"They went out the lobby. If you don't mind me saying, you're better off without her if she goes off with other men."

"Shit!" he cursed uncharacteristically. *Savannah was in trouble.* He put five dollars as a tip on the table for her and shot up out of his chair. He bolted out of the bar, ran out the lobby and saw a dark blue BMW screeching down the road in front of the hotel. He thanked God he hadn't bothered with valet parking as he ran to the Mercedes

and he got in, started the engine and sped off after it, cursing himself for letting her go through with this.

"What's wrong with me?" he wanted to hit himself. "I never should have got her involved with Malenkov." He pushed the car faster until he saw it up in the lane to his left. He remembered all Sarah's bouts of defensive driving, surveillance and anti surveillance techniques and forced himself to slow down. He tucked in behind a motorcycle that was itself two cars behind the BMW, and made sure he drove as normally as he could so he didn't tip them off.

Had they made Savannah? He asked himself, trying to rack his brain for anything he might have missed. Did he know she was working for Malenkov? Do they know about me? He thought. The two heavies had left shortly after Savannah had disappeared upstairs with Westinghouse, but he'd figured that would be normal, as they'd be expecting their boss to be busy for at least a few hours. They hadn't even looked at him, so he'd thought he was safe. Unless someone in the hotel mentioned to the man or his associates that Savannah had started off her night with him, but then why wasn't he next to her in the car? He wanted to believe that he'd simply chosen to take her to his home instead of a hotel room, but the thought was more wishful thinking than anything else. Savannah was in trouble.

You never let me down. Her words resonated uncomfortably with him and felt bitter as they repeated themselves over and over in his head. "I have, and I'm sorry," he muttered, angry at himself. But he wasn't going to let her down again. Whatever it took, he'd get her back safely.

It dawned on him that it was unlikely Westinghouse managed to take Savannah by himself; he must have had help. And even if by some freak chance he hadn't, almost guaranteed that, from what Malenkov had said about him being well protected, that he'd have an entourage with him wherever it was he was taking her. One man against two, three, maybe a dozen; he realised he didn't stand a chance by himself.

He followed the BMW as it turned left, glad that another car was still between him and it, and pulled out his cell phone as he straightened out. He flipped it open, scrolled down for the right number, and dialled. He didn't have to wait long for his call to be picked up, another bonus, he thought, trying to come up with the few silver linings in this dark storm cloud.

"John, its Ellison: we've got a huge problem."

"What is it?" he heard the younger man ask, all business and no nonsense.

"Savannah's been kidnapped: I'm following her but I need your help. Is Cameron with you?"

"Yeah, of course she is," John replied. Ellison had to admit that was a stupid question: wherever he went Cameron would be. He'd spotted the closeness between the young man and the machine; as far as he could tell Sarah was the only one who hadn't worked out what was going on yet. *"Where are you?"*

"I'm in West Hollywood, heading north up 18th Street. Savannah's in a dark blue BMW, I'm following."

"We're downtown... Cameron says we're five miles from you. Don't get to close, we'll come to you. Keep the line open and talk us through where you're going... Cameron says we can be there in fifteen minutes."

Thank God, Ellison almost sighed in relief, before chiding himself that they weren't there yet; a lot could happen in fifteen minutes.

Savannah opened her eyes and saw nothing but a blur of colours spinning above her. She couldn't make out the slightest detail of anything. The next thing she was aware of was pain; her head

throbbed harshly and she felt like she was going to throw up any second. She tried to get up but her body wouldn't cooperate; she just wiggled slightly but nothing much happened. She blinked a few times – and that took some effort – and her vision started to clear. A fog clouded her mind and she felt sluggish, worse than any hangover she'd ever experienced and more out of it than she'd ever been on either homemade moonshine or the drugs soldiers had given her in exchange for sex. She lay there in a semiconscious daze, staring up at a drab grey metal ceiling above her, with metal latticework above. She had no idea where she was and tried to concentrate, willing herself to wake up.

Cold water splashed on her face and brought her a little closer to reality. She managed to raise her head up and look forward, and immediately wished she hadn't. Westinghouse and three men, all visibly armed with pistols, all laughing at the sight of her pathetic, drugged up form laid helpless on the ground. "Wakey wakey," Westinghouse grinned. "Time we had a little chat, don't you think?"

She tried to reply, to tell him to fuck off, but she couldn't get her lips and tongue to work together to say anything coherent. All that came out was a drunken, wordless slur. "That'll wear off soon," he told her, "don't worry."

She tried to think about what had happened, and it came back in bits and pieces to her, but not enough to fully recall it. It didn't matter though; she'd regained enough senses to know that she was in deep shit. She ignored him and looked at her surroundings. They were in a large, filthy, empty room. Possibly a warehouse or storage room of some kind, she thought. There was no furniture, no wallpaper or paint, and she could feel bare concrete floor beneath her. Above her was a stained, off-white ceiling with dark patches of damp dotted about. Wherever they were, she realised, it was a shithole.

"Get her up," Westinghouse told his men. Two of them picked her up by her arms and lifted her up roughly. They dragged her to a wooden chair and sat her down on it. The third man took a pair of handcuffs and secured her hands together behind the backrest. Savannah

slumped forward in her chair and tried hard to sit up straight. With effort she held her head up and looked straight at Westinghouse as he crouched down in front of her.

"Who sent you?" he asked.

"I..."

"Yes..." he tried to lead her into it, knowing full well the druggy after effects of the sodium thiopentathol still in her veins. It'd take a while for it to clear completely from her system, so he'd try to keep it simple.

"I... I..."

He sighed, disappointed. This was going to take longer than he thought. "If you can't speak then nod your head yes or no. You can do that, right?" Slowly she nodded. She didn't know what he was going to do to her but it couldn't be good. She knew he wasn't going to let her go, ever. He'd get whatever he could out of her, put a bullet in her skull and bury her out in the desert, in all likelihood. She had to hold out until she found a way to escape, which would take time.

"Are you a cop?"

Savannah shook her head slowly.

"Feds, CIA?"

Again, she responded by shaking her head no. "Malenkov?" Savannah made no reaction this time, she remained still. "Hey!" he slapped her hard in the face. "Did. Malenkov. Send you?"

"N... no!" she finally blurted out, finally able to speak, if only a little.

"Someone did," one of his men sneered.

"He's right," Westinghouse said to her. "Women don't hang around hotel bars with injectors full of barbiturates for fun. Someone sent

you: I want to know who." He was pretty sure now who it was but he wanted to hear if from her.

"Get the can," he told one of his men. The man disappeared from Savannah's view and returned a moment later with a red steel gas can. Westinghouse thrust it forwards and splashed oily smelling liquid into her face. She recognised it of course: gasoline. He thrust it more and covered her in it before lifting it up and pouring it over her head. He tossed the can away and knelt down again so he was level with her, looking into her eyes. He pulled out a cheap plastic lighter and flicked on the flame, holding it up so she could see it.

"Here's how this is gonna work: I'm gonna ask you questions and you're gonna answer them. If you don't answer, or I don't believe you, I burn you. Understand?"

"Yes," Savannah nodded. She tried to sound calm but inside she was going insane in fear. She wanted to shout and scream and struggle but she knew it would do no good. She could tell begging wouldn't do anything. The worst part was the drug was wearing off and sensation was starting to return to normal; the agony would be even worse.

"Did Malenkov send you?"

She nodded once again. "Yes," she said, aware she probably sounded pathetic and resigned.

"Stupid Ukrainian fucker," he snorted. "Stubborn old man just refuses to fuck off." His goons muttered their assent and watched, looking forward to lighting the bitch up. Westinghouse turned back to her. "You one of his crew?"

Savannah shook her head. "No; just one job."

"In exchange for?" he asked, wondering what the price the old bastard had put on his head was.

"Information."

"What kind of information?" he asked, curious. Savannah remained silent; unwilling to divulge the slightest hint of what they were doing. She felt a lot clearer now and knew she couldn't say anything about Skynet, John or Sarah. Cameron had said he was a Grey in the future, but what was to say he wasn't working for them now? Either way she refused to say a word about her friends, no matter what they did to her.

"Doesn't matter much to me," he shrugged. He'd gone off topic anyway. "If you'd managed to stick me, where would you have taken me?"

"I don't know," she said meekly.

"Don't fuck me around," he snapped, flicking the lighter back on and holding it an inch from her.

"I don't know," Savannah repeated. "He told us to call him when the job was done; he'd come and collect you."

An idea went off in his head and he allowed himself a slight grin, pleased with himself for his cleverness. "You know the number?" She remained silent, thinking about how to answer that. She honestly didn't know Malenkov's phone number, but if she said that he'd want to know who else she was working with.

"I've got it anyway," he shrugged again. He'd worked with Malenkov before deciding to start his own enterprise, and knew his contact numbers. He pulled out his cell phone, selected a number and held the phone in front of Savannah's face. "I'm gonna call this number; when he answers you tell him you've got me locked up in the trunk of your car, parked up at the hotel. He'll tell you where to meet him. If you say anything else..." he flicked the lighter on and off repeatedly, reinforcing the message that Savannah already well understood.

Westinghouse copied the number from his phone into the one in Savannah's stolen handbag, pressed call and held it closer to her head. He looked back to the others and put the forefinger of his free hand over his lips, indicating he wanted silence. He pressed for loudspeaker a moment before it stopped ringing and Malenkov answered.

"Yes?"

He nodded at Savannah. "It's Savannah," she said. "It's done."

"It took longer than I thought," he replied.

"I had to be... subtle," she said, thinking quickly.

"Very nice work. Where are you now?"

"We're parked outside the hotel; we've got Westinghouse tied up in the Volvo's trunk," she added the last part, knowing full well Malenkov was aware what car they had. At the very least it would be a red flag for him and he'd be able to tell John and the others she'd been compromised; with any luck they'd assume she was dead. She knew what John was like with his friends and allies, and just hoped Cameron would keep him from coming after her.

"Excellent! Bring him to my house."

"And what about the information we asked for?" Savannah snapped, partly wanting it to seem real but mostly just in case she actually managed to get away.

"Regent-Burke."

The phone line went dead and Westinghouse pulled it away from her. "Nice job," he said. He turned to the balding guy, clearly second in command of the group after him. "Call Lyons and Tandy and tell them to RV with us, and to bring the longs." He grinned wolfishly in

delight. Stupid old fucker thought he could just take him out like that; he had another thing coming.

"What about me?" Savannah asked, dreading the answer.

"Sorry," Westinghouse lifted his hands up and wiggled the lighter, as if to say he had no choice. Savannah rocked wildly in her chair and shouted out, fighting against her restraints and struggling to get away from it, to no avail. *This is it,* she thought, doing her best to fight through sheer terror at the thought of the impending, slow agonising end; she'd survived years of fighting the machines and now she was going to be burned to death by some psycho.

Gunfire barked twice and the side of Westinghouse's head exploded. The lighter dropped from his hands and the flame extinguished, falling to the ground a second later. The arms dealer twitched once and fell to the floor. "What the?" Savannah looked around for her would-be saviour.

"Who the hell's that?" one of his men shouted out. The others raised their weapons and looked for a target.

"Come out, asshole," another called as he picked up a Kalashnikov and shouldered it. Whoever it was would get fucking enfiladed. He glanced down at his boss; half his head was missing and his shredded brains seeped onto the concrete floor. Another, fatter man aimed his pistol at Savannah's head.

"Come on out or I blow her head off," he shouted. He tensed his finger on the trigger and took up first pressure. Another millimetre or two and he'd blow her head off.

Cameron burst into the room with her pistol raised, targeted the gangster pointing the gun at Savannah and shot twice. Her rounds smashed through his top front teeth and obliterated his brainstem before he could pull the trigger.

"Waste the bitch!" The others opened fire on her without hesitation but the rounds were like pinpricks to Cameron. They bounced off her armoured endoskeleton like raindrops, only damaging her flesh, which would heal. She rapidly targeted the others and downed them all in a hail of fire, emptying her magazine and dropping the remaining three gangsters like flies.

John and Ellison stormed into the room and swept their weapons across, searching for targets. Instead he saw five freshly blasted corpses and Cameron holding a smoking gun. "Wow," he said to her as he took in the carnage. "Could've saved some for us," he said sheepishly. He knew she was a terminator and all but he felt a bit embarrassed that she'd taken care of them *that* quickly.

Cameron simply stared at him; he should know she wouldn't let him risk his life, especially against people who were inconsequential to their mission. "They didn't put up much of a fight." She looked at the bodies of the men she'd killed, unimpressed. Soldiers would have moved as a unit, concentrated their shots and used firing and manoeuvring to either flank her or try to escape. With their weapons they'd fail, but it was apparent to her these humans possessed no training of any kind. She didn't feel any guilt about killing them. The part of her that was John Henry had considered human life sacred, but they'd been about to kill Savannah. Some people were more important than others, and John more so than anyone else.

"Anyone gonna get me out of here?" Savannah asked them, looking up impatiently. "What are you even doing here?" she asked, still in shock by the swiftness and ferocity of their attack. One moment she was about to be burnt and the next Cameron came in and massacred them without any effort.

"What do you think?" John replied as Cameron stepped over to her, saw the handcuffs restraining her hands and broke them with ease.

"Thanks," she stood up unsteadily and took a tentative step. Her legs didn't give out underneath her; she was fairly sure most if not all the

drug had gone from her system. She realised she was shaking and knew it was shock. She felt cold, too. Freezing.

"You're welcome," Cameron smiled.

"You okay?" Ellison asked, looking at the redhead with concern. Savannah nodded slowly as a few tears rolled down her cheek. She tried to hide it but it was useless. She looked down at Westinghouse's bloodied corpse and kicked what was left of his head in contempt. The bastard had been a second from burning her alive; she wished Cameron hadn't killed him, only so she could beat the crap out of him.

"I'll be fine," she sniffled. Suddenly she remembered what Malenkov had told her. "He made me call Malenkov and tell him I'd got him; he was planning to drive up and take him out. When I asked on the phone about the information he'd promised, he said something. A name: Regent-Burke."

"Doesn't ring any bells," John shook his head. Ellison was just as confused. "We'll find it out later, let's just get the hell out of here for now." Someone must have heard the firefight and called the police, who could be here any moment.

"Wait," Cameron said. She saw the AK-47 one of the gangsters had used. It was likely they had more here. A quick search turned up two more Kalashnikovs and several magazines in one corner.

"Nice find," John smiled at her. They could always use more weapons for their arsenal. They carried the weapons out and Ellison stayed at Savannah's side as she walked unsteadily, still shaking a little from the shock of being seconds away from a horrible, painful death. It'd wear off but not yet, they both knew.

Ellison and Savannah got into the Mercedes, the former taking the wheel and turning out, as John and Cameron got into the front of the Lexus, with Danny still sat in the back. The two cars left the area quickly and headed for the highway. Not a moment too soon, John

thought as he heard sirens wailing in the distance. He couldn't see them but if they were near enough to be heard then he knew it was too close a shave for comfort. He just hoped nobody saw them.

Two words started to bug John as he sat in the passenger seat and looked out the window. He didn't say a word to Cameron or Danny; he just stared out the window, immersed in his own world as the two words repeated themselves over and over. *Regent Burke.* What did it mean? Was it a person, a place? Was it even the answer to the question they'd asked? When they got to Malenkov's place he was damned well going to find out.

Chapter 29

Malenkov ran his thumb up and down the cold metal of his AK-47, pulled back the cocking handle and checked the round was still in the chamber. After serving for years in the Soviet Army, and later the Ukrainian Army, the habits of continuously checking his magazine were ingrained into him. They would never leave him, he knew, and he was glad of it. Westinghouse had never served in the military; he had no concept of discipline or need for proper preparation.

"Nikolai, is everyone in position?" he asked, speaking into the hands free microphone of his radio, pinned to his suit jacket.

"Yes. Dmitri's on the roof; Alexi and Petor have taken up positions at the left hand side of the house, and Sergei and Grigori are behind the trees to the right."

"Okay," Malenkov said to him. "Wait until he arrives, then take out his escorts. I want Westinghouse alive." He had some questions needed answering before that rodent got what he deserved. He smiled at himself as the sun bore down on them from high in the sky. The sweat on his brow was completely from the heat; he wasn't nervous. He had the advantage, and Westinghouse thought he was expecting to receive him from the trunk of a car. He'd realised immediately something was wrong when Savannah had called him: he'd given his number only to Ellison, and he'd spoken on the phone only to Ellison; he knew full well that the two of them were driving a Mercedes, not a Volvo; and it was clear to him that both things added up to mean she'd been compromised. It was a shame, he thought sadly; he'd have liked Savannah to come and work for him. She'd have been a great asset and he'd have been honoured to have a woman of such talent working for him. Still, he'd given her the answer she'd wanted; if anyone could escape he had no doubt it

would be her, and if she did then it was a fair trade and their business was done.

It was sad, but such was the reality of the life he led: he'd lost many friends in his military career, and even more in his current line of work. There was nothing else but to continue and make sure he wasn't next. He knew he wouldn't be; Westinghouse wouldn't be expecting a welcome party.

He wished now he hadn't said to meet at his house; all the gunfire would attract attention and could damage his home. His wife and children were away for the day; he wouldn't risk them no matter how sure he was of the outcome.

"Someone's coming," Dmitri's voice crackled. He was on the roof with a sniper rifle, so he could see anyone approaching and report it as well as provide top cover for them.

"Everyone stand by," Malenkov ordered. He looked out from the window of his study and saw a silver car driving up the road towards them. The car kept coming steadily towards them, clearly coming to his house. It pulled up on the road at the edge of his lawn and a single man stepped outside, wearing jeans and a black shirt, open at the collar and straining against the huge muscles beneath.

"Who's this?" Malenkov asked himself. This wasn't Westinghouse or any of his known associates. Whoever he was, he was *huge:* a full head taller than himself and covered in hard muscle, like a bodybuilder. He stared blankly forwards with an emotionless mask of a face as he left the car and marched down the front lawn towards the house.

Nikolai opened the front door and stepped out towards the stranger. This was *not* the time for someone to make a random house call. One thought that crossed his mind was that this man might be from the CIA, but they usually made appointments if they wanted to see Sasha. *Usually.*

"What's your business here?" he demanded, standing his ground a few feet in front of the newcomer and realising just how big and foreboding he was up close. The man made him nervous, made him want to go for his pistol straight away, and made him regret leaving his Kalashnikov back inside the house.

"Sasha Malenkov?" Steroids asked, looking across at the man in front of him. His facial recognition software rejected the man: negative identity. He scanned all the windows of the house and saw nothing.

"Mr Malenkov is busy," Nikolai snapped angrily. "Go away."

Confirmation: Sasha Malenkov present at location. Steroids reached behind him and pulled out a pistol from the waistband of his trousers. Nikolai's eyes widened in horror and he went for his own weapon under his jacket, but he realised instantly he was too slow.

Two shots cracked and split Nikolai's skull in half with a fountain of blood erupting from the back of his head.

"Kill him!" Shots exploded from half a dozen locations and rounds slammed harmlessly into Steroids, *pinging* against his endoskeleton beneath the flesh. He immediately located five men: one on the roof, two on the left of the house and two at the right. All the men on the ground were armed with AK-47s, and he identified the roof gunner's weapon as a Dragunov.

The front door opened again and Malenkov appeared with his own Kalashnikov and opened fire. "Dmitri: Covering fire! Sergei, Grigori: advance! Flank him!"

Nervously the two men jumped up and ran from the trees whilst the others increased their rate of fire. Malenkov took aim and fired short bursts at the man, but he just absorbed them and kept coming. *What the hell is going on?* Even if he was wearing body armour the force of the shots would knock him down, he didn't even flinch. He

pressed the com button on his radio and looked up to the roof. "Dmitri: take him out, headshot."

A shot rang out from the roof and struck Steroids' face, smacking his head backwards like a pinball and the inertia momentarily halting his advance. Malenkov stared in horror as the headshot – in the centre of his face – failed to kill the man.

Dmitri quickly chambered another round and fixed his crosshairs over the same spot on Steroid's face. The butt kicked hard into his shoulder as a second round shot out and hammered into the cyborg; again having no effect. *"Shit!"*

The rounds did no damage to Steroids but he spotted the shooter on the ceiling, aimed his pistol and fired twice. Dmitri screamed and rolled down the tiles, plummeting to the ground where he lay in a broken heap.

Sergei and Grigori split up and moved to flank Steroids, as Alexi kept up a steady stream of well aimed single shots. All of it was totally ineffective. Flesh was mangled by the rounds and puffs of blood erupted from the machine's body but he ignored it as might a man being hit by a pea shooter. Malenkov saw gleaming chrome exposed where the late Dmitri's shots had hit, and he thought back to Sarah Connor. Maybe she wasn't so crazy after all.

"Into the house!" Malenkov shouted at them as he pushed his front door open and stepped back inside. Splitting up outside was doing no good; perhaps they could bottleneck it and concentrate their fire more effectively indoors.

The others made a dash for the front door, forgetting fire and manouevre as their fear took a hold of them and self preservation became paramount. All of them were terrified of this... *thing* slaughtering them like cattle and shrugging off everything they threw at it.

Steroids watched the gangsters turn and run, and he calmly took aim and fired three times at the closest one to the door, striking him in the head twice and shoulder once.

Grigori sagged like puppet with its strings cut and fell to the ground. Alexi tripped over his corpse and went over, but Petor and Sergei jumped over him and made it to the front entrance in time to turn around and watch as Steroids, still walking closer and only a few feet away now, drew down on the youngest member of Malenkov's crew and fired four shots into his chest.

"Alexi!" Malenkov screamed out and tried to run for the door to help, knowing it was useless but not caring. Alexi was his son and heir to the family business when he would finally retire. No more.

"Sasha, we have to run," Sergei shouted at him. "The back door's our only chance."

"No," he said fiercely as he loaded another magazine into his rifle. "We kill this thing."

"I'm sorry about Alexi, but we don't stand a chance against him. He's been shot over fifty times and keeps on coming."

"Then we kill it now," he snarled and nodded and tilted his head towards the staircase. They needed the higher ground. The three of them rushed up the stairs and spread out at the balcony at the top, taking position just as the door exploded off its hinges and fell to the floor. Steroids stepped into the house, his massive shoulders just barely fitting through the doorframe with only an inch of clearing on each side. The three of them took in the shredded clothes and flesh, the metal clearly showing underneath, and a single red orb that glowed furiously and appeared to lock onto them.

"Matir Bozha," Malenkov's voice was barely a whisper as he froze in place. This thing, this... man, wasn't human. What the hell was it?

"Fire!" Sergei screamed, firing short bursts of rounds at the machine. Petor and Malenkov did the same, hoping their concentrated fire might have some effect. The AK pummelled Malenkov's shoulder as he fired round after round, aiming at the thing's chest and scoring direct hits to no avail. What was it going to take to destroy it? He shifted his weapon up a fraction of an inch and aimed at its head as Steroids raised his handgun and fired twice, catching him in the chest and shoulder. A sharp double-punch from an invisible boxer slammed into Malenkov and threw him back to the floor. He lay there, stunned, only able to watch as it started up the stairs towards them, ignoring the gunshot wounds completely.

Petor shifted his aim to the machine's weapon and fired, knocking the pistol from Steroids' hand and allowed himself a slight grin; at least he'd disarmed it: that should slow it down.

Not sharing his theory, Steroids took the stairs two at a time, undeterred by the ineffectual fire that rained down on him. Petor's gun ran dry and he immediately lifted it up above his head and started down the stairs, passing Malenkov's wounded, bleeding form. There would be time to treat his boss when this thing was dead. He roared as he swung the rifle like a club at Steroids and smashed it against his head, cracking the wooden butt down the middle and wrecking the working parts.

The T-800 stared at the man as he gaped in horror. Any blow that would crack a rifle's butt would kill a man, but it wasn't even fazed. Nothing could kill this thing. *Nothing.* Steroids' arm was a blur as he snatched the man by the neck and raised him up into the air. Petor struggled in his grip and kicked out at his chest to no avail, he screamed and flailed like a madman until he took a good look at Steroids: the red eye glared evilly at him. It was a soulless mechanical demon, sent from hell. He stared, mesmerised by it as the machines' grip tightened, cutting off his air and crushing his windpipe. He choked and cried and kicked out again, tears in his eyes. He felt and heard a sickening crack and then he went limp. Steroids dropped his lifeless body and continued on.

"What. The fuck. Are you?" Sergei screamed in Ukrainian at the machine as he backed up the stairs and fired uncontrolled bursts at Steroids; half of them missed his firing was so panicked and erratic. The weapon clicked empty and he dropped it immediately, pulled out his sidearm and continued pumping 9mm rounds as he stepped backwards, his eyes were wild with terror as his rounds, even at a range of a few feet, did nothing. Steroids marched up the stairs inexorably towards him, stepping up to Malenkov as he did so. The Ukrainian arms dealer tried to move out of his way, tried to reach for a weapon, but he couldn't move an inch. He could only look up in terror as Steroids lifted his foot up, pressed the sole of his shoe down on Malenkov's face and stamped hard, crushing his skull with a sickening *crunch* that burst blood from his ears and spilt out onto the carpet.

Sergei emptied the magazine, paused for a moment as the hulking obscenity drew even closer. He was out of his mind: everyone was dead and he was alone with this unstoppable monstrosity. He threw the gun as hard as he could and it just bounced off Steroids' face; the machine didn't even blink.

"No! Leave me alone!" Malenkov's last living associate turned and bolted away from the steps, all fight gone from him now as he focused only on fleeing, getting away from here and saving himself. He ran as fast as he could down the corridor, past all the bedrooms in the house. He never saw Steroids raise the weapon, he never saw Steroids take aim, almost casually, and he never heard the crack as he fired once. A sharp, split second pain in the back of his head, was the last thing he ever felt.

Steroids left the landing and conducted a sweep of the house, finding no other people present. The back door was open, indicating some humans had escaped; likely Malenkov's family or any non-combatant employees. The plan had been to eliminate any witnesses but the T-800 was satisfied nothing could trace the attack to Kaliba: the authorities would likely conclude Malenkov and his men had been killed by a rival gang. He pulled out the cell phone

from his pocket and dialled Coleman's number. "Sasha Malenkov has been eliminated."

Everything was deathly quiet and still in the disused industrial estate just south of Downtown. It was rare anyone ever went there anyway; the place had been abandoned for a number of years and condemned, and although city planners talked of redevelopment the ideas put forward were always vetoed by some unknown source higher up in the government. As such, the only people to frequent the area were junkies, vagrants, kids who liked to explore where they shouldn't, and the occasional hooker and her trick with nowhere else to go. As such the broken bottles, used needles and spent condoms that were randomly littered throughout the complex were usually enough to put many people off going any further, which had made it perfect for Malenkov to store his arsenals in secrecy.

A vagrant sat against the wall of an old factory and swigged on the bottle of cheap vodka he'd bought with money from a stolen purse. On his lap was a syringe filled with clear liquid; he'd had to part with the last of the cash from the old lady he'd jumped. He'd not been too careless with it, mind; he could still taste the Big Mac and fries he'd eaten before seeing his dealer. Now his stomach was full and he had a fifth of vodka and enough white gold to keep him chasing the dragon all night. It was party time!

He pulled the belt out from the loops around his filthy trousers and wrapped it around his skinny bicep, pulling tightly until he saw some veins popping up. Quickly, he grabbed the syringe and pushed the needle through his skin with a shaking hand. As he depressed the plunger ecstasy washed over him like a wave. *That's the shit* , he sighed contentedly. The world became a brighter, better place and all his anxieties, the pain and the hardships of living rough, living purely for the next hit, were all forgotten. When it felt this good, he mused, it was worth it.

A high pitched droning sounded up above and he craned his head up to take a look. Red and blue lights blinked in the dark sky and he could make out a faint shape in the air; something sleek and large. Bright lights burst from the machine and shone down onto the ground, illuminating the shitty, rat infested industrial grounds, but also giving the man a glimpse of the flying thing. It was like no aircraft he had ever seen in his life. It didn't even look human.

"Aliens," he muttered with a grin on his face. It was a UFO, obviously. "Take me," he cried out to them. *"Take me!"* This world was a crock of shit. He'd bet anything that with them life would be a constant high; they must have some shit that'd make what was coursing through his veins seem like diet coke. He could make out its shape; sleek and metallic, shiny, but like an insect too. It was beautiful...

He reached up to try and touch it, all sense of spatial awareness gone and not realising over three hundred metres of air stood between him and the spaceship. Circles on its side spun and moved, and the spaceship – for that's what it had to be, he thought – pivoted at an angle and pointed its nose downwards.

Whoosh... A bright, blazing flame streaked out from under its fuselage and shot down through the air, leaving a long trail of smoke in its wake. It slammed into a large warehouse and the walls blew apart; glass shattered and concrete and steel fragmented and flew outwards. The insides started to burn brightly and thick black smoke poured into the air. A second shot followed, and a third, creating two more fireballs one after the other, completely levelling the burning warehouse.

The intense beams of light shut off and the aircraft pulled up into the sky, turned southeast and quickly shot away, disappearing into the night sky. "We're at war!" he shouted out. Aliens weren't friendly after all; they were attacking. He had to tell someone! He tried to get up but stumbled back down onto his ass. Aliens were coming to get them; ah well, he thought: it'd been a long time coming.

He never saw what the 'spaceship' had fired upon, had no clue about the large arsenal of hidden weapons inside that had been its target, and he didn't care. The world was ending, as far as he was concerned. Aliens were attacking and he was just going to sit back with the heroin in his system and half a bottle of vodka left, keep the high going and watch the fireworks.

"I'm bored," Savannah sat back on the couch and sighed. There was nothing to do in this house; no TV, no computers, no books; she couldn't even do any homework because it had all been left at home and she hadn't been back there since Mr Ellison had picked her up from school weeks ago. She'd missed so much school now; mommy was always telling her that it was important, but she hadn't said anything to Sarah about it. She didn't think Sarah would care.

"What do you want to do?" Sarah asked her, stroking the girl's flame red hair. She looked closely at Savannah and could definitely see the resemblance with her older self. Her older version had a thinner face – though that could be from years of hunger – but the same jaw, the same cheeks and the same eyes – in colour at least; the girl in front of her had eyes full of innocence, though also a slight sadness to them. She'd already gone through more than anyone her age should: losing both her parents, being relocated to live with strangers and hiding out in the desert. It was no life for her, and Sarah reflected wistfully that it had been no life for John either. Still, she'd tried to keep Savannah entertained as best as she could. She'd known they might have to use the safehouse so she'd set it up with that in mind, but she hadn't had keeping children entertained as a priority when she'd stocked it with supplies. "We could play chess again," she offered. She'd kept a set in the house because John had always played when it was just the two of them.

"I don't like chess," Savannah shook her head. Sarah had tried to teach her how to play but it was really boring. They'd played a couple of times and Sarah had let her win, which she didn't like. She knew

what she wanted to do. "I want to go home," she looked down at the floor. Sarah was nice. Cameron, John and Mr Ellison had all been nice to her, but she wanted to go home.

Her words broke Sarah's heart; she knew how it felt to have to leave your old life behind and never look back. "You can't, I'm sorry. Your mom's gone."

What disturbed her even more was that there were no more tears at the mention of her mother, she just nodded sadly and looked down at the floor. Savannah had cried only the once when her older self had so tactlessly said her mom was dead, but since then she'd said nothing more about it. It broke Sarah's heart to watch as she just dealt with it, and wondered what the loss of her father and unwittingly living with a machine all that time had done to her. She was independent, for sure. She was aware the girl had made her own lunch back at Ellison's house a couple of times, and had seemed content enough on her own. She guessed with all Weaver's scheming and planning at Zeiracorp, Savannah had mostly been left to her own devices, with only a nanny to watch over her.

"What about these?" Sarah went over to a drawer and pulled out a deck of cards. "Has anyone ever taught you to play poker?"

"No," Savannah shook her head and looked at Sarah, curious as she pulled the cards out of the pack, sat down on the floor and started to shuffle them. "I'll show you," she smiled. "Let's have a game of Texas Hold'em," she said. She split the deck and started to shuffle the cards. "Wait a minute," she said, thinking out loud as much as talking to Savannah. "We can't play without chips." She looked around for something they could use as a substitute; they didn't have coins, or matches, or...

Several 9mm ammunition boxes lay on the dinner table at the other side of the room. "Perfect," she said as she got up and snatched them from the wooden top. She sat back down with Savannah, opened the two boxes and emptied them, dividing them up into two

sets of twenty bullets before handing the second set to Savannah. "We'll use these as chips."

As Sarah continued to shuffle the deck she watched as Savannah sorted the haphazard pile of bullets into four neat rows of five. Tidy, Sarah noted. Very tidy, and very organised even at only seven years old. *Weaver's influence,* she thought. She'd seen the same thing with Cameron; the cyborg's clothes were always ironed with military precision and – back when they'd actually had a proper house and she'd had her own room – her possessions had been all placed in perfect order. Savannah must have seen how the T-1000 acted and copied it, like any child would with their mother; either that or the machine had demanded it from her, which seemed more than likely. She could imagine a machine trying to make a human more like itself.

"What we do," Sarah dealt Savannah and herself two cards each," is try to make pairs, or threes, fours, or all the same suit or five cards in order: two-three-four-five-six, for example. With me so far?"

An enthusiastic nod from her pupil confirmed she was, so Sarah continued. "I'll just show you what to do for now, so show me what cards you have." Savannah put hers down to reveal an ace and a ten, both of clubs. Sarah did the same with a king of spades and a seven of diamonds. "So what you'd do then is either check, meaning you don't want to bet anything yet, make a bet, or fold – give up." Sarah explained how to play, showing her the flop, the turn and the river cards, what to do in each round, and how to never let anyone know what cards you have, and to try and bluff if you need to. After a few practice sessions they were ready to play, and Sarah dealt them in again.

The first round they both checked and Sarah revealed the flop – a king of hearts, ace of diamonds, and a 4 of hearts. Sarah looked at her own cards: a king of spades and a queen of hearts. She picked up two bullets and tossed them onto the floor between them. Savannah hesitated for a moment, considering her cards and thinking about what Sarah had told her. She placed two of her own

rounds next to Sarah's. "You've got something, do you?" she grinned, earning a slight giggle for her effort. Sarah turned over another card to reveal six of clubs – nothing interesting, she thought.

"Check," she said, not wanting to scare Savannah into folding.

"Check," Savannah repeated.

Sarah turned the river card to reveal a queen of diamonds and she suppressed a smile. A pair of queens wasn't bad, she thought. Could be better but enough to go in on. She tossed another two bullets into the pile.

Savannah once again looked at her cards and tried to remember everything. She couldn't help but grin – Sarah pretended she didn't notice – and put in five of her own. "Raise you," she said with a smile.

"I'll call that," Sarah challenged and put another three rounds in. "Let's see what you've got." She put her cards down first and watched as Savannah did the same. Two kings: clubs and diamonds. "You got me!" Sarah said in pretend shock. She couldn't help but smile back as Savannah beamed her pearly whites in victory and giggled happily. "I thought you were bluffing!" Sarah winked at her.

Car engines sounded outside in the distance and Sarah immediately snapped alert. She put down the cards, got up and started to pull the Glock off the arm of the sofa. Savannah stared up at her, fear apparent in her eyes. "What is it?" she asked nervously. She could see Sarah was afraid, and it made her even more scared.

"I don't know," Sarah said. "Turn the light off and get down behind the sofa."

Savannah nodded and without a word she hurried to the light switch and turned it off, instantly killing the bulb and immersing them in darkness. Sarah approached the window but she could hear the

engines outside, getting louder as they approached, and didn't need to see anything to know they were in trouble.

"Is it John and Cameron?" Savannah asked, still nervous as she poked her head up to try and peek, even though the curtains were drawn.

"Stay down," Sarah hissed at her. "Lie on the floor!" Savannah did as she was told, fear in her eyes. Sarah slowly peeled away the curtain by a couple of inches and peered out of the window. Outside she could see three large dark 4x4s, parked still but with their lights on. The doors opened and people got out of the cars, moving tactically and holding weapons. She couldn't make out much but she saw rifles and she saw the silhouettes of their helmets as they approached. It was definitely a SWAT team, but were they feds, police, or Kaliba? *Shit!* "How the hell did they find us?"

She quickly counted at least fifteen men exiting the vehicles and starting to take up positions. This wasn't good; there was no way she could take all of them on. She'd get two, maybe three, before they overwhelmed her with sheer numbers. She backed away from the window and put her pistol away; that wouldn't do any good against the firepower out there. She took Savannah by the hand and pulled her phone out at the same time; she led the girl into the closet and opened the door. "Stay here," she told her. "Don't make a sound." She spotted one of the AKs propped up against the wall inside and pulled it out. Savannah got into the closet, sat down on the floor and hugged her knees tightly to her chest, looking up nervously at Sarah. "Don't make a noise or open this door until I come get you," Sarah told her.

"Okay."

She closed the door and went back into the main room, leaving Savannah in the closet. She hoped they wouldn't find Savannah if she stayed still and quiet, and they'd be so preoccupied with her they wouldn't notice. She could hear boots stomping over the ground outside, surrounding the house and getting closer. They were

preparing to attack from all angles. She heard something else up in the air outside. High pitched mechanical whining, like the drone of jet engines. *What the hell is that?* She shrugged it off; no time to think about that now. Sarah backed into the corner of the living room and dragged the sofa with her, keeping it between her and the window. She crouched down behind it and shouldered the AK, holding the barrel just above the couch's backrest and glad she'd lined it with Kevlar.

She pulled out the Glock and laid it on the floor, and took out her cell phone. She was glad John was out but at the same time she was outmanned and outgunned completely; even though she didn't want it, she had to admit she needed some heavy duty backup. She scrolled down the short list of contacts on her phone until she found Cameron's, and pressed to dial. She needed help or at the very least to warn them.

"The number you've dialled cannot be reached, please try again later."

"Shit!" she grumbled. She tried John's and got the same result. A third call to Ellison yielded no luck and she wondered if it was them at all, maybe it wasn't the problem on their end. Could Kaliba or Skynet block her calls to stop her calling for help? She couldn't even send them a message to tell them to stay away.

The window shattered and something small and metallic flew into the kitchen, at the same time she heard wood splintering as doors were kicked open and more glass breaking as men stormed through windows elsewhere in the house. *Grenade!* Sarah ducked behind the couch out of instinct as the bomb bounced against the back of it, inches from her. She got down, closed her eyes and covered her ears a split second before it went off in a blinding flash of light and high pitched wailing. Even with her ears covered the sound tore through her deafeningly. After a second or two she grabbed her AK and made to get back up – covering her eyes had saved her, she reckoned. She put the barrel back over the top of the couch and saw

three black clad soldiers in balaclavas and Kevlar helmets pointing assault rifles at her.

"You're surrounded!" one of them barked at her. "Drop your weapon!"

"Like hell I will," she growled back at him as she held her finger tight against the trigger; she was aiming squarely at the lead man and it would only take one more fraction of an inch to turn his heart and lungs into mincemeat.

The lead soldier stared at her, recognising her face. He'd been briefed that she might be here. "We know who you are, Sarah Connor, and we've got an unmanned drone targeting this building. If you don't surrender we'll just fall back and call in an air strike." The soldier looked at her wild, angry eyes and decided they needed a demonstration. He pressed the com button on his radio. "Romeo-One-Two to Zero-Alpha: target the ground one-hundred metres south of the building." He let go of the com and spoke once again to Sarah. "Look out the window, in three... two... one..."

Boom! Sarah watched out the window and saw a flash erupt from the ground outside, conflagrating into a fireball that threw up rocks and smoke and quickly dissipated. The explosion still echoed through the desert, slowly fading away. *Shit,* she cursed inwardly. They weren't lying. She couldn't fight against that.

Savannah stepped through the kitchen door, followed by another figure in black who held an M4 carbine with the barrel pointed into her back. Sarah shook her head in dismay; they'd found her easy enough. She'd hoped they'd storm in and rush her, and at least then she'd remain hidden.

"You've got three seconds or I kill her," the newcomer told Sarah, leaving her in no doubt that they were Kaliba and not the cops, if the airstrike already hadn't convinced her.

There was no hesitation: Sarah dropped the gun to the ground with a frustrated sigh. She'd been beaten and she hadn't even managed to

fire a shot. It was over.

"Where's your son?" one of them asked as he turned his weapon on her. Two of them lowered their own and let their guns hang from their slings, and moved to restrain her. She didn't even try to fight back; any move she made could get Savannah killed if she did. She let them cuff her and they dragged her from behind the sofa towards the team leader.

Sarah refused to say a word, she simply stood there and stared impassively at the men, sick that they'd threaten to kill a little girl. Savannah said nothing and didn't move, but the fear in her eyes was visible for anyone to see. Tears started to form in her eyes but she was too scared to even cry.

"Where is John?" the man repeated, pointing his gun at Savannah again.

"I don't know!" Sarah snapped. "He should have been back by now."

"The rest of the house is clear," another soldier called out from elsewhere in the house. "No Weaver, no AI."

The commander got back onto his radio once more. "Zero-Alpha, this is Charlie-Zero-One: We've captured two bandits; Sarah Connor and Savannah Weaver. No sign of Catherine Weaver, John Connor, his cyborg or the AI."

"John won't come!" Sarah snapped at him.

"Alpha and Bravo units return to base with prisoners. Leave Charlie Team to wait for the other targets."

"Roger, Zero-Alpha: over and out." The commander saw Sarah's phone on the ground and pocketed it, figuring it might be useful in locating the other Connor and his associates later. He turned back to his men. "Get them loaded up into the trucks," he ordered. The soldiers frogmarched her and Savannah outside and led them

towards the SUVs. They held her and Savannah in place and she looked up into the air to see the sleek, razor sharp form of the HK drone she'd seen before. But this one was different; it was bigger. Its lights illuminated the safehouse and the surrounding ground, and through the beam she could spot missiles secured under its body.

A missile shot out from under it and ploughed into the safehouse, shattering the wooden and metal structure in a massive eruption of fire and smoke that threw out hundreds of pieces of debris. Sarah just shook her head in despair; there was nothing she could do, no warning she could give, and Kaliba had all but won. John would return to a smoking ruin, with nothing left. With no money, no food, no shelter and no weapons, they were effectively finished.

The team leader turned to a tall, slender mercenary carrying an M4 with a grenade launcher. Sarah saw that behind him was another man carrying a large sniper rifle the same as Derek's, and another wielding an M-240 machine gun. The other two carried regular assault rifles but had disposable 66mm LAWs strapped to their backs. She knew what all that was for: Cameron. They knew what she was and they were planning on taking her out as well as John. "Hoskins: take up ambush positions and wait for Connor; radio in once they're eliminated."

"Sir," Hoskins nodded and turned to his men. The five of them jogged outwards, spread themselves out and took up positions in scrub bushes and behind rocks, disappearing from sight and blending into the darkness to await the rest of Team Connor.

The remaining soldiers blindfolded the pair of them and dragged Sarah inside one of the cars. They pushed her down into the back seat footwell and shoved her to the ground. The men sat on the seat behind her and put their booted feet onto her, one leather toecap rested an inch from her nose. She could smell the polish on it.

The car started up and pulled away over the rough desert road. Every rock and every bump rolled Sarah's head on the uncarpeted floor and as the vehicle picked up speed it got more violent. The

vehicle went over a particularly rough patch and Sarah's head lifted up and smacked hard against the floor, nose first. With her hands cuffed behind her she had no way of stopping it and all she could do was take the punishment and try to disconnect herself from the pain.

"Savannah?" she called out to her, not knowing where the girl was and unable to see anything through the blindfold.

"Shut the fuck up!" A rifle butt slammed down into her side and caught her kidney, sending shockwaves of pain ripping through her back and doubling her up as much as was possible in the cramped space. They were finished, beaten, and the worst part was that Kaliba were waiting to ambush the others when they came back, and she had no way to warn them. *Stay away, John,* she begged silently. *Just stay away.*

The old, World War 2 era service rifle felt reassuringly heavy in Knowles' hands as he held it up in front of him. It was a good deal weightier than his G36, and hopefully, he thought, it'd also be more effective. He let go of it with his left hand and picked up a stopwatch that hung from his neck by a long loop of string. He pressed the *start* button and immediately dropped it, picking up an ammunition clip, fumbling with the unfamiliar motion and managed to clumsily slot it into the top of the rifle. He picked up the stopwatch again and pressed *stop.*

"Four seconds," he grumbled. Even though that had included dropping the stopwatch and picking it back up again, it wasn't good enough. Four seconds could be the difference between life and death. He repeated the motion several times, loading and ejecting the clip over and over, getting used to the action. He'd only ever used modern assault rifles and was so accustomed to detachable box magazines that the motion of inserting a clip into the top of the weapon just didn't feel quite right.

Finally he was satisfied he had it just about right, and loaded the clip again. He crouched down on one knee, lined up his sights and aimed carefully through the darkness at the wooden target two hundred metres away, pulled the butt tight to his shoulder, and slowly exhaled as he pulled the trigger. The shot rang out loudly and carried in the open ground, but he wasn't too bothered by it. He'd gone out into the desert, where he wouldn't be disturbed as he familiarised himself with his new purchases.

Knowles fired three more shots into the target then put the rifle down onto the ground, got up and jogged the distance to the target, which he'd made to be vaguely man-shaped. He'd hit to the right of the chest, but he'd been aiming for the centre. He went back to his firing point and adjusted the rear sight. He picked it up again, took the same position, and fired another four shots. This time when he went up to inspect his handiwork he saw he was bang on target; four bullet holes right where they were supposed to be.

More practice shots followed; from kneeling, sitting and standing positions. The prone position was the most effective, he knew, but seeing as it would likely be fast paced, close quarters, indoor combat he reckoned there wouldn't be much call for lying down; he'd instead have to use the walls and other objects as cover.

Once he was satisfied he could use the Garand comfortably and confidently, Knowles put it back onto the passenger seat of his car, pulled out a sandwich he'd bought from a gas station and started munching on it. It was supposed to be a chicken and bacon club sandwich but all he could taste was mayonnaise and salt. Not that it mattered, he thought. He'd eaten total crap before and it put some needed calories into his body; that was what counted. He'd started to work on a plan, though he knew it needed ironing out.

As he chewed on the stale bread, salty meat and cholesterol-laden mayonnaise, he looked down at a map of the region, illuminated by the flickering light from the fire he'd built. Kaliba's complex was somewhere in the region, and he'd seen the mountains where they'd been nestled in. It was remote, hard to get to and even harder to

find. He didn't know the way; all he'd seen of it was when he'd stepped out of the helicopter, and nothing else. The windows had always been blacked out.

He'd gone online and done some more research, looking for the more desolate, remote, and most mountainous areas. Places tourists wouldn't venture to, where there was nothing worth much seeing. He'd spotted a few likely locations to the northeast of the Sierra Nevada range, but couldn't narrow it down. He'd seen articles about UFOs flying in the Sierra Crest region, and reckoned that was his best bet, knowing what those 'flying saucers' probably really were.

"How the hell do I get there?" he muttered with a mouth full of the last bite of his sandwich. Once he swallowed it he opened up a can of coke and took a swig. The Sierra Crest was fucking *huge,* he'd realised. It'd take him years to search it all on his own. Even with a helicopter or a plane he could spend days flying up and down before he found it, announcing his presence to them with an unscheduled flight. He'd thought about every possibility; he'd even considered paying for a skydiving lesson, forcing them to divert and jumping out, but it hadn't been as much unfeasible as completely nuts, and decided against it.

There was one way, he realised. Kaliba owned their own helicopters, and used them to ferry mercenaries and staff to and from their base. If he could get onto one, or at least find a way of tracking it, he could either get there or at least find out where it was. And he knew where they operated from: Oxnard airport. "That's where I go," he said to himself. First thing in the morning, he'd head there and stake the place out, and wait for them.

"Cameron, do you have any idea what 'Regent-Burke' is?" John turned to her from his previous position of staring out through the car window into the desert. The two words had rolled around in his head

since Savannah had mentioned them, and he'd racked his brain trying to make sense of them.

"No," Cameron replied, still behind the wheel and driving along the uneven desert road. Neither the Lexus nor the Mercedes behind them had been built for driving on anything other than paved road surfaces, and even the dirt road had made a bumpy ride. "I could find out," she suggested. She could connect wirelessly to the internet with ease and search for Regent-Burke.

"That might be a good idea," he said, but something worried him about it. "Can Skynet track you if you do?"

"It's possible," Cameron told him honestly. She didn't want to hide anything from John. "I went online earlier," she confessed. "I accessed the US military defence network." She saw John staring at her and sensed he wasn't happy with her, but she'd done it for him. "Danny said they have combat capable drones; I wanted to even the odds."

"What did you find?" John asked, curious.

"I've gained access to all unmanned aircraft assigned to the Four-Hundred-Thirty-Second Expeditionary Air Wing at Creech air force base, Nevada."

"How many is that?" Danny asked.

"Sixty MQ-9 Reapers and a small number of prototype X-45s," she answered.

"That's a lot of aircraft," John whistled. She'd had hers and John Henry's squadron in the future, but *sixty drones?* Maybe they did have a chance after all. "If I asked you to," he said to Cameron. "Could you find out where Skynet and Kaliba are?"

"You want me to launch airstrikes," Cameron concluded. "I think I could find Skynet."

John frowned uncomfortably. He didn't like the sound of *'I think.'* "Can you do it without risking yourself?"

"I don't know," Cameron admitted. "Skynet might trace me if I try."

"Leave it for now," he said. "Wait until we get back to the safehouse." If she couldn't do it safely he wasn't going to risk Skynet harming her; they had this other lead, this Regent-Burke, whatever it was. They could find that out and hopefully that would lead them to Kaliba. But he wouldn't risk Cameron; losing her wasn't an option.

"Ah... *about that,"* Danny leaned forward and pointed out of the window. "Is that smoke?"

John and Cameron looked out of the windshield and sure enough, smoke was billowing into the air about a mile away, where the safehouse was located. "What the hell?" John stared into the distance, not believing what he was seeing. Cameron slowed the car down to a crawl and killed the lights. She called Ellison's cell phone and told him to do the same, and the two cars edged forwards in total darkness for another hundred yards or so before she stopped, keeping the engine idling, and remained rooted to her seat, scanning through the darkness and switching from normal vision to infrared and back again several times.

"What's going on?" John asked her nervously. He couldn't see much up ahead, it was too dark, but he could see the smoke rising up and there were small glowing fires scattered around. Something had happened. "I'm getting out," he said, opening the car door. Cameron grabbed him firmly and pulled him back in. "Let go, Cameron," he struggled against her grip. "Mom might need help." Something had happened, she could be hurt.

"Wait," Cameron ordered him.

"For what?"

"The safehouse is destroyed," she told him. "There's nothing left." She could see it had been blown to pieces and lay strewn across the area. She stared intently outward and saw a heat signature overlapping a bush, yet it was distinctly different to the small fires that burned all around. She engaged her night vision and the world appeared in a ghostly green glow as she also zoomed in and swept it again.

A deafening boom cracked through the air and the front of their car jolted violently. Metal exploded outwards and oil splattered up onto the windscreen, obscuring their vision. Cameron instantly put the Lexus into reverse and backed up fifty yards, and she could see Ellison doing the same. She threw the car into a sharp turn left and an explosion rocked the ground where they'd just been, shaking the car violently and shattering the windows. *Grenade,* Cameron thought. "Get out," she told John and Danny, though they were already scrambling for the doors and all three of them dived out of the vehicle. "Stay behind the car," she told them. Another shot rang out and the car shuddered again.

"We're being shot at!" Danny shouted as he took cover behind the wheel. He realised that he'd left the gun John had given him on the seat.

"I know!" John snapped back. It was pretty fucking obvious, he thought. He saw Ellison and Savannah exit the Mercedes a few yards away and take cover behind it, too. Both Cameron and John recognised the deep thunder-crack of another shot and knew what weapon it was. "That's a fifty-cal," he said to her.

"It's meant for me," she told him. There would be no need to use such a large weapon to kill just John; they knew about her, what she was, and had come prepared. Machinegun fire opened up and shattered the glass of both vehicles, accompanied by single shots from what Cameron recognised as M4 assault rifles.

She opened up the trunk of the Lexus and pulled out the three AK47s, handing one to John and holding the other two herself.

"How many are there?" Savannah shouted from behind the Mercedes, still wearing the escort's dress and holding a pistol in her hands. Cameron popped up from behind the car as shots hammered into it and whizzed all around. She saw some soldiers had broken from cover and were advancing forwards, another one was moving to their right to outflank them. "Five," she counted them. She targeted the soldier dashing to their right and fired a burst. He screamed and went down. "Four," she corrected herself. In her periphery she saw another man wielding a rocket launcher, and heard it start to launch before she could turn to engage him. "Incoming!" she shouted, diving on top of John and covering his body with hers. Danny got the message and threw himself away from the car a split second before it erupted into a fireball and flipped over from the force of the missile.

"Stay here," Cameron told John and Danny. "Stay down." John kept prone and started to fire back – as best as he could with the long magazine of the AK – as Cameron sprinted from behind their cover towards Ellison and Savannah's position. Shots zipped past as she ran and a few slammed into her, biting through flesh but nothing more. She drew close to them but didn't stop. "Here," she tossed the third rifle to Savannah, who shouldered it and started to fire back as Cameron continued her sprint to the left, all the while looking out at where the fire was coming from.

More explosions kicked up dirt and threw out clouds of smoke as grenades were launched and Cameron immediately stopped in her tracks, aimed at the offending rifleman and fired off three bursts, dropping him. The machine gun still kept going, however, and its fire was keeping the others pinned down. At the same time a soldier with another rocket launcher was pointing it at her and preparing to fire. She aimed at it but the gunner fell backwards as John's AK crackled with half a dozen rapidly fired single shots. With that threat eliminated she turned to the machine gunner and opened fire on him, splitting his skull open and silencing the automatic weapon.

"Advance!" Savannah screamed out as she fired a burst, broke from cover and dashed awkwardly twenty yards forward before dropping to her knees and loosing more shots as John moved forwards. Cameron gave them the covering fire as they moved forward and Ellison, armed only with a pistol, fired in the direction of one of the soldiers, knowing he couldn't fight automatics with only a handgun but wanting to help and figuring if his shots were even only in the vicinity of the target it could still do some good. Incoming fire, even if it wasn't hitting you, was distracting.

John and Savannah moved together, firing and advancing between them, until the latter pumped a burst into a rifleman and Cameron took aim and fired at the .50 cal sniper; her shot smashed through the glass of the scope and drilled his eye through the back of his head. Her final shot echoed through the desert as all weapons fell silent.

John ran forward to the safehouse, sprinting with everything he had until he got to the ruins. Cameron was right; there was literally nothing left; just charred, shattered wood and metal. *"Mom..."* he tore large sections of wall away, hoping maybe she was just hurt or unconscious. There was nothing there. She was gone, so was Savannah. John dropped to his knees and doubled over onto all fours, shaking like a leaf as tears began to run down his cheeks and sobs wracked his whole body. The whole world fell apart around him once again. "Not again," he said quietly. She'd already died once. "Please, not again."

He felt a hand on his shoulder but barely even noticed it. He couldn't think straight. His mom was dead; he'd stopped it from happening just for her to die again later. "It's my fault," he growled at himself. "I left her alone while we were all out. I killed her."

"It's not your fault," Cameron said as she crouched down behind him.

"John," Savannah stood off to one side, away from him and Cameron. "You couldn't have stopped this; if you'd been here you'd

have been killed too." She didn't say it but couldn't help but fear for her younger self; there was no sign of her either.

As the two girls tried to comfort John, Ellison stood silent and Danny wandered through the remains of the house, picking at what was left. There wasn't much of anything; a few cans of food that were dented, their labels singed, but still relatively intact. A few AK magazines, mostly bent but a few still in good shape barring scratches and dents. Not much at all.

"She died for me," John muttered. So many had, past, present and future, and now his mom had died because of him. How many times he'd wished he'd never been born: this was yet another of them.

"This one's alive," Ellison called out, spotting one of the mercenaries moving and letting out a low groan. John was up like a shot, he marched over to Ellison's position and stood over the wounded man. He had a ragged hole in his chest and blood pooled all around him, he was hyperventilating and stared up at John, part afraid, part pleading. "Hel... *help me,"* he blurted out, coughing out some of the blood that had started to pool in his lungs.

"Fuck you!" John dropped down onto his knees over the injured soldier and snarled in his face. "You fucking bastards just can't leave us alone, can you?"

"Please..." the merc reached out, begging for help.

"There's a first aid kit here," Danny came up and held a small dented white box up, one of the few things he'd found still in one piece.

"We're not wasting it on him," John said coldly, glaring at the critically injured man with pure hatred burning from his eyes.

"He won't survive," Cameron backed him up. "He's lost too much blood; we'll never get him to a hospital in time."

"Is there any morphine?" Ellison asked. "We could make him comfortable."

"Screw him," John snapped and turned back to the man on the floor. "You murdered my mother and a little girl; you don't deserve any fucking comfort." Ellison shook his head disapprovingly. John looked to Cameron and thought he could see a trace of the same thing he saw in Ellison. She said nothing though; she knew John was in charge and also that he was grieving; he wasn't himself but he needed her support, not for her to question him.

The merc's eyes widened and he burst out in a fit of coughs, struggling to clear his lungs and throat and fight through the pain. They're really gonna just watch me bleed to death? "They... they're not... dead," he coughed painfully, hoping that might earn him a point or two.

"What do you mean?" John asked him. When the man hesitated he swung back and punched him in the face, smacking the mercenary's head into the ground and knocking him into a daze. *"Fucking tell me!"* he shouted, teeth bared and sending flecks of spittle flying into the man's face. He punched over and over again, smashing his fist into the man's face, snapping cartilage, cracking teeth and striking him repeatedly. When John finally stopped the mercenary's face was a brutalised, bloodied pulp.

The merc spat out more blood and shards of bloodied teeth. He was in too much pain to try and lie to them. "They... they took her... both of them... our mission was to kill you all, but you weren't here; we took your mother and the girl and waited for you... you beat us, wasn't expecting that..." Pain tore through him again and he cried out, it was too much to bear. "Please... it hurts..."

John slowly got up to his feet, stood upright and stepped away from the man. "What're we going to do with him?" Ellison asked. He was working for Kaliba but he was just a hired gun, he probably didn't even know what was going on. He was the enemy but he didn't deserve this.

John whirled around, drew his Sig at the mercenary's face and pulled the trigger, blowing the back of his head away and splattering a gory mess of blood and brains all over the ground. John fired a second time, and again. He screamed out as he kept shooting the dead body until the magazine ran empty. The mercenary's head was gone; blown to pieces by his point black shots. All that was left was a bloody, pulpy mess with bits of bone scattered around and lots of blood. Even as the gun ran dry and John kept pulling the trigger, resulting in only a hollow click that didn't seem to register to him. Cameron took his arm and pulled the gun from his grasp. "I'm okay," he told her, suddenly feeling a lot calmer, clearer than before.

He caught Ellison's eye, could see the disapproval and the distaste even though the man said nothing. He could tell what the older man was thinking, but whatever. John walked away from Ellison; if he or anyone else didn't like it they were free to leave.

"I'm sorry," Cameron said to John, suddenly feeling a similar guilt to what he was. "It's my fault they have Sarah."

"What do you mean?" he looked at her, confused.

"When I hacked the defence net, Skynet must have traced me. It's the only way they could have found this location."

John shook his head. Maybe he should be mad at her but he wasn't. "It doesn't really matter now," he said, resigned. It wasn't important how it happened or why; it had happened, and there was no way of undoing it. Dwelling on it or being pissed at people wasn't going to do any good and Cameron had only been trying to help. Only one thing mattered now. "Kaliba have mom and Savannah: we're going to get them back."

A/N: 'Matir Bozha' is Ukrainian for 'mother of God.' Hope you all liked the chapter, please do let me know your thoughts.

Chapter 30

The night sky over the desert started to gradually fade away, from black to a purplish shade that was starting to grow lighter as the sun approached, further revealing the carnage and destruction in even more detail, more than John wanted to see. In the slowly breaking dawn he could see the remains of the sofa pulled up against the corner of the living room-cum-kitchen; the Kevlar still standing strong up the back. In the middle of the room, bullets were scattered on the floor. John knelt down and picked up half a burnt playing card, and saw slivers of others nearby. "They were playing cards when they were attacked," he told the others. Cameron stood guard with her AK as Ellison and Danny hauled the last body into a line with the other mercenaries. The wounded soldier John had executed; very little of his head remained and it was a gory mess he didn't want to look at. Ellison put a singed, blackened shower curtain over the man to cover him up, before placing the burnt bedcovers over the others. They didn't have shovels to bury them and it didn't seem right to just leave them out in the open, so he'd done what he could.

Savannah unselfconsciously unzipped the dress she was wearing, let it slip to the ground to reveal her in just her underwear, and reached into the back seat of the Mercedes to get her own clothes; she hadn't had the chance to get changed after her capture and now was the first opportunity. She noticed Danny casting a few glances over at her as she stood in just bra and panties. He was trying to be subtle about it but wasn't doing so well, she thought. "Dream on, Danny Boy," she said curtly, causing him to stutter awkwardly and walk off in embarrassment. She pulled her normal clothes back on and looked over to Cameron, stood with John and talking, trying to console him even though it wouldn't do much good.

"We'll find them," Cameron told him reassuringly. She knew from previous experience that telling John to keep away for his own safety

would be useless; he'd never leave his mother in captivity; not by the FBI and certainly not by Kaliba. Sarah didn't matter very much to her, other than that she was another protector for John and he was attached to her. But she *was* concerned for Savannah. She knew why: John Henry had become attached to the girl, but it didn't make it any less real for her. She wanted to make sure the younger Weaver was safe, though she also knew if it came down to a choice she'd select John over her without hesitation.

"Damn right we will," John replied. He stepped over to the line of mercenary bodies, ripped the covers and the shower curtain off, undoing Ellison's work and exposing the corpses. He knelt down beside the one he'd executed, unzipped his combat vest and manhandled the body, pulling the arms back and twisting them until he could manouevre them one by one out of the holes and pull the garment clear off. There was a bullet hole in the chest and shoulder and it was stained with blood, but all the pouches were intact and they still held magazines and other equipment.

"What're you doing?" Ellison frowned at John as he continued onto the next body and unclipped the belt kit. John wasn't even careful with them; he pulled up the dead man to clear the webbing from underneath and just let the body drop roughly back to the ground.

"We need their stuff," John said without looking away. Savannah decided to do something useful, got onto her knees and started to help John police their weapons, ammunition and supplies, organising it into a neat pile and combining it with the weapons they'd already had.

"You want the good news?" Savannah asked John.

"Is there such a thing?" he replied. He wasn't crying like before, she noticed. John had forced himself to put what had happened to the back of his mind, disconnected it all and distanced himself from it. The mercenary had said his mom and Savannah had been captured, not killed; they wouldn't kidnap them just to kill them, at least not yet, so they had time.

"Well... *less bad,"* Savannah said. She gestured to the weapons lined up neatly on the ground. "Three M4s – two with grenade launchers attached and six magazines each, M240 machine gun with two full belts of ammo and one half, our AKs and pistols, and the *really good news,* " she patted the top of the tubular launcher, "one sixty-six-millimetre LAW rocket launcher." That thing would kick the shit out of whatever it hit, she knew. Terminators would be blasted into scrap metal in the blink of an eye. "The only problem is it's a one-shot, disposable weapon and we've only got the one." She pointed to the M82 Barrett sniper rifle, "its got six rounds still in the magazine but the scope's broken; none of us can use it."

"I can," Cameron told her. "I don't need the scope."

"The M4s won't scratch a machine's paint but the grenade launchers might do some damage," Savannah added. She pulled something else out of her pocket that she'd forgotten to add to the list. "One thermite grenade," she placed it on the ground next to the LAW. "I think this was meant for you, Cameron."

"They knew what I am," Cameron agreed. She realised she'd have to be careful from now on; her kind were so dangerous in the future because humans were generally so poorly equipped, and in the present because people didn't believe in machines from the future. Humans in this time, with access to powerful weapons, who knew what she was would extremely dangerous to her, and to John.

John held the thermite grenade in his hand and stared at it, not saying a word. They'd kidnapped his mom and were going to kill not just him but the only other person aside from Sarah that he loved. Personal didn't quite describe how it felt to him. If they wanted to kill me they should just kill *me,* he glowered. Going after the people he cared about was a mistake that would cost them dearly, and he was dead set on making sure they regretted it in their last moments. He was going to take the thermite grenade and burn Skynet into a pool of molten plastic and wire with it.

"The Lexus is totalled," Ellison pointed out. "We'll all have to fit in the Mercedes, plus the guns in the trunk."

There was something more pressing in John's mind, however. He wanted to get his mom back, he wanted revenge, but the practical side of how still eluded him. They had a lot of hardware now; about the only good news they'd had. But they still needed information, which was the one thing they were most sorely lacking right now. "Cameron," he turned to her as she faced him, her full attention on him as he spoke. "Find out what 'Regent-Burke' is."

Cameron sensed the tone of his voice; much like his future self giving an order. She nodded once, opened up her wireless controls and used it to search for the nearest civilian satellite in orbit. It only took her a few seconds to find one and connect to it, and she bounced her signal off a string of military satellites and via computers around the world to mask her presence. She sifted through the vast amounts of data almost instantly available to her. It had been a new sensation to her when she'd controlled the UCAVs and taken over Serrano Point; it had been novel when she'd accessed the military defence network, but this was so different. There was so much information available, on every subject. The amount of data seemed infinite and growing at an exponential rate every second. The sensation of so much information all at once was like nothing she'd ever experienced. She wasn't surprised that John Henry had become dependent on internet access. There was so much to see.

Unlike John Henry, though, Cameron was a cyborg on a mission. She searched through files containing the words Regent and Burke, sifted through their contents and discarded them at a speed no human could conceive. In a single second she'd sifted through a hundred thousand and was only getting faster as she started to adapt to her new capabilities.

"I'll have it soon," Cameron told them. There was so much data though, much of it irrelevant. She created filters to block out certain irrelevances and narrow down her search field. Within a minute

she'd sifted through millions of files – forty-one percent of them pornographic – and discarded them. None contained what she wanted. She realised that the information wouldn't be on the surface web, but deeper within in the more secure realms of cyberspace. This would take some work but she was confident she would find what she needed soon.

As the others waited for Cameron to find what she needed, John picked up one of the M4A1s and pulled out the magazine. He pressed down on the bullets at the top and the spring depressed a third of the way down. He picked out one of the full magazines and slotted it into the rifle. The weapon felt cold and reassuring in his hands. The rifle itself was weak compared to the HK-417s but they'd been destroyed along with everything else in the house. Any weapon was better than none, though; and he grenade launcher was an extra comfort.

"You don't remember anything at all about where you were?" John asked Danny, hoping that if he asked yet again it might jog something in his memory.

"Just that we were in the mountains," Danny said. "It was a two hour flight but there were a lot of turns."

"Misdirection," Cameron told him. "So you'd never know where you were going." She could search and talk at the same time. It was taxing, however. She was concerned that if they were attacked whilst she was searching for Regent-Burke online, that it could slow her processing and response times. She knew that they were desperate, however, and she had no choice.

Harsh white light glared into Sarah's eyes and forced her to loll her head to the side and squint to avoid it. Her eyes stung from the intense white fluorescent light and she tried to bring a hand up to shield her face but her right arm was held in place by something

warm and padded. She tried to move all her limbs and found they were all similarly bound, and a large leather strap ran across her chest, securing her in place and sending unpleasant memories of her cell in Pescadero; how she'd been tied up at night to prevent her escaping.

Her head, however, was unrestrained, and she looked around to examine her surroundings. She was in a large room with white walls and stainless steel trolleys off to the side, their contents hidden by clean white sheets. A fire hose was encased in a clear cabinet against the wall, and a security camera was situated above the wooden door in front of her, looking down on them. On a bed to her left was Savannah, similarly restrained in a bed.

"I'm scared," she said to Sarah. Her cheeks were marked where she'd been crying, her hair was messy and Sarah could smell urine in the air. At some point Savannah had pissed herself; whether from fear or simply from being held captive for so long, she didn't know.

"We'll be fine," she tried to reassure the girl, and hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. "I'll get us out of here."

"Where are we?" Savannah looked around as Sarah had, she didn't know who'd taken them or why; all she wanted was to go home.

Sarah tugged at her restraints, testing them to see if she could budge them any. She had maybe an inch of movement "I don't know." Twisting them did no good; they were leather and she could tell that no amount of pulling, twisting or forcing would get her free. She looked up at the camera and realised that even if she did manage to free herself, chances were more hired goons would be on her in seconds.

"How are we going to get out?"

"I don't know," Sarah repeated. Why did they have to find Savannah? Why couldn't they have just left her alone; she was a kid for fuck's sake, she wasn't any threat to Kaliba.

The door opened and three men stepped inside. Two wore dark coloured suits and ties; one was white and had a cigarette in his mouth, and the other looked Japanese. The third man – if it was even a man, Sarah already had her doubts – wore khaki combat trousers, boots, and a black t-shirt that strained against his large, muscular body. Biceps threatened to tear the sleeves and the main part of the garment was tight against his chest. He was as bald as an egg and his stare was vacant, empty. *Machine* , Sarah thought instantly. She stared at them and said nothing as they filed into the room.

"Sarah Connor," the smoker addressed her. "I'm extraordinarily pleased to meet you."

"I'll bet," Sarah rolled her eyes.

"Really," Coleman said, taking a drag on his cigarette. "The mother of John Connor, the woman who trained her son since birth to fight against Skynet and the machines – the fact neither Skynet or ourselves have been successful in killing him shows just how well you taught him." He took a final drag and looked for somewhere to stub out his butt. There wasn't anywhere so he simply dropped it to the floor and crushed it underfoot. It wasn't like it was going to bother Sarah or Savannah; they'd soon have a lot more bothering them than that.

"I actually have a great deal of respect for you," Coleman continued. "You gave up your life to protect your son and try to prevent the war: I admire that."

"Unfortunately, you chose the wrong side," Nagase added.

"A machine tried to kill me when I was nineteen and then my son when he was twelve; we weren't exactly given a choice," Sarah spat out.

Coleman nodded in understanding. "Fair enough. *We were* lucky enough to be given the choice."

"You chose wrong," Sarah spat out in contempt.

A wry grin spread across Nagase's lips. "Did we really?"

"John beats Skynet. We win."

"If you say so," Coleman replied. He wasn't going to sit here and argue with the woman. He didn't know how the war had actually concluded; he'd been sent back before the end of it. Connor's forces had gained the upper hand, if only barely, but Skynet had prepared for that and sent assets to this timeline to ensure it didn't happen again. Any possible victory in the previous timeline was moot. "But here, in this timeline, your son has no chance. Skynet will win, and in the future we realised our only chance for survival was collaboration with the machines."

"You mean you took the coward's way out," Sarah accused them.

"It doesn't matter what you call it," Nagase shrugged. "All that matters is which side you're on after the last shot's fired. We made sure we were on the winning side." He remembered when they'd come back in time. There'd been six of them then, plus the three machines. Fischer had disappeared without a trace after installing a roving back door in the defence net for Skynet to utilise at a later date; the third terminator had embarked on a mission to kill Catherine Weaver and had disappeared without a trace; and the other man – Gary Farmer – had tried to defect. Once they'd arrived back he'd called a private, humans only meeting, and tried to convince them to seek out the Connors and aid them, that with the knowledge and resources they'd accrued they could resist the machines. They'd promptly revealed him to the machines, and Steroids had eliminated him. "There's no chance for humanity."

"You said you never had a choice," Coleman said to Sarah. "Now I'm giving you one: tell us where your son is; we'll take you both in and you can join us. Be on the winning side for once." He smiled at her, "wouldn't that be easier than constantly fighting a hopeless, losing battle?"

She could barely believe the crap she was hearing, and a wide grin spread across Sarah's face "You really think I'm going to fall for that?" she asked, chuckling to herself. She'd never heard anything quite so funny in a long time. "I'll take what's behind door number two."

Such a shame, Coleman thought. He'd known Sarah Connor wouldn't give up her son that easily, but still he'd given it a try, hoping she'd make things easier for herself and them. "Door number two it is," he sighed. He stood over Sarah and looked down at her. "I *did* offer you an easier way: remember that," he told her as Baldy went to the fire cabinet and pulled out the hose, and Nagase took the white sheet off the trolley and took out a sheet of cling film.

Sarah watched them at work, well aware of what they were doing, and it scared her shitless. She tried to keep herself composed but couldn't help her heart beating rapidly, painfully inside her chest in anticipation of what was to come as Nagase approached her with a stretched out length of cling film and held it over her. She looked over to Baldy and saw him just standing there, observing. The two humans were doing the torturing, she realised. The machines might be ruthless bastards but they didn't hold a candle to man.

"I'll ask you once," Nagase said, looking over Sarah as he held the cling film up above her. "Where are your son and the AI?"

Sarah shook her head silently, refusing to even speak to tell them she wasn't going to answer their questions. "Have it your way," Nagase shrugged. He lowered the film down over Sarah's mouth. She shook her head, bucked writhed and struggled, moving to keep him from getting a grip and making it as hard as she could. Baldy came over and grabbed her by the forehead in one meaty palm, and held her head in an unshakeable iron grip, squeezing slightly on her temples to increase her discomfort as, now unimpeded, Nagase wrapped the cling film around the lower half of her head, creating a seal over her mouth and leaving her nostrils clear.

Both Nagase and Baldy moved aside as Coleman approached and held the hosepipe above her stomach, holding the nozzle aimed at her face. The machine stood over Sarah's head and held it in place. Coleman seen this done many times and was glad he wasn't on the receiving end of it. Nagase turned the valve and the water started to flow through the hose audibly.

Water shot out of the hose and blasted into Sarah's face. She screwed her eyes closed and tried to turn away but couldn't; Baldy's grip was too strong. The pressurised jet of cold water stung harshly against her face and went up her nose, filling up her sinuses. Sarah tried to snort it out and exhale but more kept coming, overwhelming her. She couldn't breathe. Pressure built up in her head and chest and she kicked out and silently screamed in blind, animalistic terror beneath the cling film and the water as the sensation of drowning took over. Her lungs felt like they were about to explode...

"Leave her alone!" Savannah shouted at them, her voice falling on deaf ears.

"Stop!" Coleman shouted, his voice echoing around the room. Nagase turned the valve and the water jet slowed into a trickle and cut off. Coleman ripped the cling film from Sarah's mouth and she immediately opened her mouth wide and gasped for air, desperately sucking in as much as she could. Her chest burned badly and she felt like she'd been stabbed in the heart, the pain only slightly soothed by the cold air she raggedly inhaled. Never had air tasted so sweet to her.

"Where are your son and the AI?" Coleman demanded. "Where's Catherine Weaver?"

Confusion hit Sarah and she stared at him, unsure what he was talking about. "What AI?"

"Come off it, Connor," Coleman shook his head, disappointed. He pulled out another cigarette and lit it up, taking a long drag and sighing as the nicotine worked its magic through his system. "I love

these things," he held up the cigarette in front of her. "We all know the dangers, but when you live through nuclear holocaust and World War Three, little things like lung cancer seem quite trivial compared to the myriad ways you can meet your maker.

"You won't live long enough to die of lung cancer," Sarah panted out breathlessly, sounding like a smoker herself, she realised.

"And why's that?" he asked, smiling like an adult talking to a particularly dim child. "Is your son going to come rescue you and kill me, or his cyborg maybe?"

"No," Sarah shook her head. *Crap! They know about Cameron.* She'd hoped that at the very least she'd remain a secret ace up their sleeve, waiting to be played. Still, she tried to look calm as she spoke. "But the second you're no more use to the machines," she nodded at Baldy standing behind her, "they're going to kill you."

"If you say so," he took another drag and turned to Nagase. He realised he'd already made a mistake with the water boarding: he'd given her enough time to get her air back. He secured another section of cling film over her mouth. "Again," he said to his accomplice, holding the hose above her once more. "Twenty seconds."

A second blast hit Sarah in the face and again she felt the horrible sensation of drowning, her nostrils and sinuses being invaded by the pervasive water that robbed her of precious oxygen and built the pressure back up in her chest. It seemed to go on forever. *They're going to kill me* , she thought, silently screaming as she went ballistic beneath the spray. They weren't going to stop...

After an eternity it ended, and once again the cling film was torn from her mouth. She fought for breath again and cried out. To her side, Savannah had started crying, too as she watched Sarah's ordeal.

"We found your safehouse, Sarah. Tell us where your other ones are."

Sarah gasped and coughed painfully and waited a few seconds for the sheer crushing agony in her chest to start to subside. It didn't, but she had to keep them talking, to buy herself enough time to prepare for round three. "We don't have any."

"Bullshit," Nagase snapped. "Give her another twenty seconds."

"It's not bullshit! Our first safehouse was the lighthouse; you destroyed it. The second was in the desert and you blew it up: there's nothing left. I don't know where John is, probably hiding somewhere." At least she *hoped* he was hiding. She hoped he wasn't going to do anything crazy like come after her again. He'd broken her out of jail with Cameron's help, which worried her even more. John didn't leave people to the wolves, ever. Even when he'd been twelve he'd screamed and protested when she'd hidden him away in the steel mill and stayed behind to fend off the T-1000. But this time it wasn't a bunch of donut-dunking jail guards and sheriff's deputies; they'd be up against Kaliba's private army, complete with cyborgs and combat aircraft. She hoped John would be sensible enough to stay away, or that Cameron and Ellison would convince him to.

"Where are they likely to hide?" Baldy finally spoke. Skynet had access to the security cameras throughout LA County and the surrounding areas, and facial recognition technology, but it had been searching for the Connors since the mercenary teams had failed to eliminate them. They'd remained hidden in the desert and were likely to avoid densely populated areas.

"He's a teenager; who knows what goes through that head of his," Sarah said.

"I think you *do know,"* Coleman said to her. "I know why you're holding out and I understand. But we're not going to stop until you break. How much pain you go through is up to you." He turned to Nagase, still manning the release valve for the water. "Thirty seconds," he instructed.

"You'll kill her," he protested. She was no use to them dead.

"She's strong," Baldy backed up Coleman. "Thirty seconds."

Nagase turned it one once more and a third round hammered Sarah with torrents of pressurised water blasting into her. "Stop it!" Savannah shouted out to no avail. Nobody listened or cared about her protests. After thirty seconds it stopped and Sarah was allowed to breathe again.

"Are you going to tell us now?" Coleman demanded. "Or do we go again?" Nobody had ever lasted three bouts of waterboarding before; normally they were singing like canaries after just the one round.

"I... don't know... anything," Sarah gasped. She felt her trousers wet at the crotch and realised it wasn't the water. She felt humiliated that they'd already made her piss herself after only a few minutes of interrogation, and was glad she genuinely didn't know where John was. She'd never give him up even if she knew but ignorance made it easier to take, because she had no choice but to accept what was coming her way.

"Fine," Coleman shrugged. "Turn it on again; don't stop until I say."

"No," Baldy stopped him with just one word.

"What do you mean no?" Coleman was seriously confused now; they were slowly breaking her down. It might take minutes or hours, but he was confident if they kept it up she'd spill the beans by the end of the day.

"You won't break her like this," the T-888 explained.

"We both know everyone gives in eventually," Nagase argued. "Three, maybe five more rounds, and she'll have nothing left. She'll be begging us, tell us everything we want."

"Not like this," he repeated. "Some people can withstand pain better than others: Sarah Connor is one of them."

The two humans didn't understand him. Coleman knew everyone had a breaking point, it was just a matter of finding it. If it took them a month then so be it, eventually Sarah would divulge everything: safehouses, bank accounts, ammo stashes, anymore allies they had. "I take it you've got a better plan?" he asked the machine.

Baldy turned towards Savannah, craning her head up and towards them as much as she could. As soon as his eyes locked on her she shrank away in fear and tried to wriggle out of her restraints. "Do it to her."

"You want us to waterboard a seven year old girl?" Coleman stared aghast at the machine.

Nagase couldn't believe it either. "Jesus, that's cold."

"Sarah Connor has a high pain threshold. Savannah Weaver is a child; she won't be able to resist, and Sarah won't be able to watch her in pain."

Savannah's eyes widened in fright and a tear rolled down her cheek as she stared at Baldy and then at Coleman, holding the hose nozzle. She could see how hurt Sarah was, how she'd cried out for breath, and she was terrified. "Don't hurt me," she shook her head, but her cries fell on deaf machine ears.

"You can do this one yourself," Coleman snorted. "I'm not waterboarding a *child."* There were still a few lines he hadn't yet crossed, and this was one he wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. Baldy ripped off another sheet of cling film and stepped over to Savannah, holding it above her head.

"You leave her the fuck alone!" Sarah snarled as Baldy stepped away from her and towards the other bed. Savannah struggled to get

away but couldn't, and panic set in. She thrashed around on the bed as Sarah had and tried her best to keep away from him.

"Please..." she struggled beneath him, tears streaming down from her eyes and running down her face. She just wanted to go home; why couldn't they leave her alone? She didn't understand what this was all about. She cried and started to sob loudly, breaking Sarah's heart as she looked on, helpless to prevent it.

"Stop it!" Sarah shouted at them, pulling on her restraints like a woman possessed as she tried with all her strength to break out of them, knowing it was futile but not giving a shit. Savannah screamed out until Baldy pressed the cling film down onto her open mouth. She stared up at him and screamed silently. As she breathed in she sucked the cling film, making it concave, and it went taught as she exhaled again.

Baldy took the nozzle from Coleman, who watched speechlessly as the Triple-Eight held it above Savannah's head. No fucking way was he going to do this; Baldy was welcome to it. "How many accomplices does your son have?" the machine asked Sarah.

Sarah stared at them and froze. How could she answer that? But if she didn't then Savannah would get the same treatment she had. Condemn her son or condemn Savannah: how the hell was she supposed to make that choice? The worst part was she knew the answer to that question.

"We know about the cyborg and Catherine Weaver; how many more are there?" Coleman asked.

"And Dyson," Nagase added.

"And Dyson," he repeated. Sarah and John had built up quite the little gang together. It was a damned good job Skynet had located the source of the hack or who knows what the little band of merry rebels might have come up with. "Where's Weaver's AI?"

"Weaver disappeared with the AI," Sarah said, making things up on the spot. "I don't know where." She knew that wouldn't be good enough, so she decided to take it further. "She said something about Germany. I haven't heard from her in two weeks."

"And John?" Baldy asked.

"He's with the tin miss, that's it."

"What about Dyson?"

"The machine killed him," Sarah said. "So you couldn't get him back and do anymore damage.

Coleman shook his head slowly. "We know you're not a killer, Sarah. We know you didn't kill Miles Dyson; you didn't kill Danny either."

"Ten seconds," Baldy said to Nagase.

"No!"

Savannah's eyes shot wide open and bulged slightly out of her sockets as sheer terror overcame her. The film sucked in and was pulled taught and her nostrils flared rapidly as she started to hyperventilate. She turned her head away until Baldy grabbed her with his free hand and forced her to face the nozzle. Water erupted into her face and Savannah screamed silently, mirrored by Sarah's anguished, raging cries that echoed around the room.

"I've found it," Cameron said. She'd searched tens of millions of files and websites online before she'd discovered what she'd been looking for. There had been no website, nothing on search engines and nothing solid to search for. After fruitlessly sweeping cyberspace she'd changed tactic and started perusing through emails. None had contained the term 'Regent-Burke' in the titles but she'd found

several from two individual email addresses that combined to form the name. She'd read their contents and confirmed it was what she was looking for.

"What is it?" John asked expectantly.

"Regent-Burke Solutions: they're a private security company; they supply personnel to companies around the world. I found emails to oil and building companies in Iraq."

"Mercenaries," Savannah concluded.

Ellison sat back on the hood of the Mercedes, not encouraged by Cameron's findings. "We'd already figured Knowles was doing something like that: how's this anything new?"

"It took an hour of scouring the internet just to find that?" Danny said. "I thought you were meant to be advanced." A moment of pride welled up in him; if his AI had been on their side then he was confident it would have gotten the job done in a fraction of the time.

"Shut up," Savannah smacked the back of his head and Danny stepped away from her, staring irritably at the redhead.

John ignored his comment and looked to Cameron; he could tell there was more to it than that. Cameron wouldn't have brought it up if there wasn't a reason behind it. "Carry on," he said. "What about them?"

"It's operated by two people: Dominic Regent and Bradley Burke – former US Army Rangers. They recruit ex-military personnel for private security operations."

"What's that got to do with Kaliba?" Ellison asked. He couldn't see where this was going.

"I found emails exchanged between them and the Kaliba Group. They were encrypted but I managed to decipher them. I'd had to

operate online for fractions of a second at a time and reroute through thirty different satellites and computers to avoid being traced again; that's why it took so long."

"What're these emails about?" Savannah asked.

"Contracts, payments and requests for more personnel; Regent-Burke are unhappy because they've lost a number of employees assigned to Kaliba's operations, and Kaliba want more."

"Did you find anything useful?" Danny asked.

"Regent-Burke's business address in Burbank," Cameron replied.

"Nice work," Ellison nodded to her. He wasn't aware of her full capabilities; he didn't think any of them, even John, really knew. But he was impressed that she'd done it so fast. It had taken hundreds, thousands of man hours of sifting through files, emails and such to build cases against people when he'd been in the Bureau, and she'd done it in just one hour.

"Let's go," John said, opening the door to the driving seat.

"Go and do what?" Danny asked.

"Go there and get some answers," John replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Find out where Kaliba is and how many more of these hired goons they've got working for them."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Savannah said. John started to slide into the driver's seat but Ellison held him back.

"What?" John asked. They couldn't afford anymore hesitations; every second they waited put his mom and Little Savannah in more danger.

"Rifle," Ellison nodded down at the M4 still hanging by a sling around his neck and shoulder. John took it off and unclipped the webbing from around his waist, walked around to the back of the car and put

it into the trunk, as Savannah and Cameron collected up all the policed weapons and ammunition and did the same.

"What if we get caught with all this in the car?" Danny asked. All it would take is a cop to stop them randomly and ask to open the trunk, and they'd be screwed.

"We can't take it all with us," Cameron agreed. The problem was they had nowhere to store it; the safehouse was rubble and they had nowhere else to go. They were homeless and had no base of operations. That needed to change; they couldn't continue indefinitely without a safe location to stay in.

"Put it all in and we'll think of something on the way," John snapped. "Come on, let's go."

They dumped all the assault rifles into the trunk, took the barrel off the M240 and put both halves in with them and disassembled the sniper rifle, and Savannah, Ellison and Danny got into the back seat.

Cameron got into the driving seat and John sat beside her. She'd already plotted a route using online street maps and knew where she was going. She pulled away from the ruins of the safehouse and rolled out onto the desert road.

As she drove she turned to look at John and watched him stare intently out of the windscreen at the desert scene ahead. She flashed a small smile at him but he didn't react, he just carried on staring, deep in thought and not taking any notice of her or anyone else in the car. Her smile faded and she focused on the road, disappointed he hadn't returned the affection. As a machine she couldn't suffer from insecurities and she knew she'd done nothing wrong to make John angry at her. She knew why he didn't respond as she'd hoped but it hurt her all the same; seeing him in pain affected her in the same way. She worried for John.

Up ahead a gas station appeared on their right. As they got closer Cameron saw it had been boarded up and looked as if it hadn't been

used in a long time.

"Pull in here," John said.

"It's not in use," Cameron said.

"Exactly."

Cameron understood his meaning and turned onto the dusty forecourt. The gas station was definitely a vacant lot; the only resident she could see was a rattlesnake coiled up at the bottom of an old pump that stared curiously at them as she stopped the car and turned off the engine. She kept an eye on the snake and watched out for other animals that could prove hazardous to John or the others. She had a pistol on her but the snake was no threat at the moment; unless they disturbed it she didn't think it likely it would become dangerous, so killing it was unnecessary.

"What're we doing here?" Savannah asked. "If we need gas we're a couple of years late by the look of things."

"Take the weapons inside," John told Ellison and Danny. "You're right," he said to the computer whizz. "We can't afford to be stopped. The three of us," he gestured to himself, Cameron and Savannah," will carry on to Regent-Burke's office and get some answers.

Cameron forced the entrance to the store section and stepped inside, holding one of the AKs in her right hand in case she was wrong and there was someone still here. She led the way inside and scanned the dim interior, glancing over empty rows and shelves, and the dusty, stained counter where the till had once been. It took only a minute for her to check the store rooms and staff area in the back, and once she'd deemed it all clear she went back outside and summoned the others in.

"Nice place," Danny whistled.

"I've stayed in worse," John said. Savannah silently concurred, and Cameron and Ellison said nothing. They hauled the assault rifles and heavier weapons inside and placed them on the ground, along with the few meagre tins of food and the one surviving plastic bottle of water.

"We should buy some supplies while we're in the city," Cameron said. Three tins of unknown food – the labels had been burnt off in the fire that had destroyed the safehouse – wouldn't last them long. "We don't know how long we'll be here," she added.

"Fine," John replied absently, his mind elsewhere.

"You gonna be okay here?" Savannah asked Ellison.

"I think so," he said. "It's not exactly four star but we'll make do."

"We'll be back in a few hours," John said as he made for the door and stepped out into the forecourt, followed by Savannah. Ellison reached out and grabbed Cameron's wrist as she turned to leave as well, stopping her before she could set foot outside. She saw concern on his face as he looked at her, then at John halfway across the forecourt and approaching the Mercedes.

"Take care of him," he said, his eyes still on John before he locked his gaze with Cameron. "First losing you, then Sarah; I'm worried about him." He'd been through more than anyone ever should have had to, and had both people he loved more than anyone else in the world taken from him. That had to shake things up a bit. The image of John executing the mercenary haunted him over and over again.

"Me too," Cameron said warily, sharing Ellison's thoughts exactly.

Knowles parked his car on the side of the road, got out and strode over to the phone booth on the street corner. He looked around to

make sure nobody was following him or watching him, and glanced back at the SUV to make sure nobody tried to steal it; the last thing he needed right now was some little bastard taking off with his car and all his weapons on board. He'd come up with his plan now; make his way to Oxnard Airport, wait for the familiar silver helicopter to show up, slip his cell phone inside and hide it, and track them online to their ultimate location, or hitch a life if he could get the pilot alone.

He fished into his pocket and brought out a fistful of change. He selected four quarters and pushed them into the coin slot before dialling. His attention on the phone in front of him; he never noticed the black Mercedes that drove past along the road behind, or the three occupants inside. He got a ringtone and then heard the numbers beep through. It rang, then again. "Pick up..." he urged under his breath. He looked around again to make sure his car was okay and the other end of the line connected.

"Hello?"

Oh, thank God! Knowles breathed a sigh of relief. He'd worried himself half to death this whole time that Kaliba would find his family; he'd had to stay away and avoid contact for their sake. "Hey, Mike: it's Andy," he tried to sound casual.

"Andy! How the hell are you, man, you still running the circuit? You should come work with me; beats getting shot at for a living."

He couldn't suppress a grin despite the fact nobody could see him. "Business going good, eh?"

"You'd better believe it: Lots of tourists willing to part with their hard earned money for a few hours at sea. Last week I had a load of college kids hire the boat out for the afternoon; paid a fortune just to spend the day drinking out on the water."

I might just do that, Knowles thought to himself. When they'd gotten out of the Corps at the same time, Mike had put all his money into

buying a boat. He rented it out by the hour for tours, fishing excursions, and the odd party; much easier work than I'm in, he thought. For a moment he was tempted to tell Mike what was going on and ask for his help. The two of them would have a much better chance, but he wasn't going to risk leaving two families fatherless.

"Mike, is Kate there?" He couldn't believe how nervous he felt asking that question; like he was a teenager again. He hadn't spoken to his wife since she'd confirmed she'd arrived okay.

"One second, I'll pass you over. Kate..."

Seconds ticked by without another word passing, and Knowles wondered if maybe she didn't want to speak to him.

"Yes?" she huffed.

"It's good to hear your voice," he sighed.

"What do you want?" her voice was icy as she spoke. Clearly she's still pissed off, he thought. He didn't blame her; it was his fault she'd been uprooted from her home without any explanation.

"I wanted to tell you: we can go home soon, carry on like normal."

Another pause. *"Are you still working for that damn security company?"* He knew she'd always hated the fact he'd taken up mercenary work after he'd gotten out. They'd both hoped to make a new life for themselves without the stresses of the Marines and being separated for so long, having more time to themselves and as a family. But things hadn't worked out that way. He'd struggled to find work as anything more than a security guard in a mall, and had grown increasingly frustrated with civilian life in a demeaning, low paid job done by ex cons and wannabe cops. Regent-Burke had been a lifeline and he'd grabbed hold of it.

"Listen, Kate: I've gotten into something deep here, and I need to sort it out before I can come home. It'll be over soon and then I'm out

for good." The phone's display started flashing, indicating the money was running low. *Fucking daylight robbery!* He put another two dollars into the machine, hoping it would satisfy the cash guzzling piece of crap.

"You promise?" He wasn't sure but it sounded like she didn't believe him. In all fairness, he thought; it wasn't the first time they'd had this discussion. The money was too good and the work too exciting; that was the problem. He hadn't been able to let go of the Corps. *"What have you gotten into?"*

"I can't tell you over the phone," he said. He didn't know if he'd ever be able to tell her really; how would she ever believe him if he did? "Let's just say for now they people I've been working for aren't what I thought they were. I *need* to do this. Trust me when I say I'm doing it as much for you and the girls as anything." And for three billion other people, if everything Sarah Connor said was accurate, he said to himself. "Mike's always going on about me working with him on the boat. Hell, I'll stack shelves at Walmart if I have to; but yeah: I'm out for good once this is over. Two days, tops. *I promise."* He'd made enough money working for Kaliba now to put his girls through college and put some away for retirement; he was done with this line of work now.

"You'd better keep it this time," she said. *"One more thing."*

"Name it."

"You're taking us on vacation: Hawaii," she said, leaving no room for negotiation. Hawaii or divorce were the two choices she'd all but given him. The woman was an extortionist. Though with what he'd put her and the girls through; disappearing for weeks working for Kaliba after he'd supposedly left that life behind, he couldn't really skimp out now she'd given him a second chance.

"Sure," he grudgingly agreed. "Hawaii it is: I'll book it as soon as I'm back. Kate..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm really sorry about all this. I'll call you in two days and we can come home again. Tell the girls I love them. You too," he added.

" *Bye,"* she said, a second later the phone went dead. *"Shit,"* Knowles cursed himself. He could be dead in two days; but how the hell was he supposed to tell her that? Her biggest fear was that he'd come home from a tour of duty feet first in a wooden box draped with the Stars and Stripes, and now he'd probably buy the farm somewhere out in the Sierra Nevadas and no one would even know it.

On the plus side; if I make it by some miracle I've got Hawaii to look forward to. "I could do with a vacation after this," he groaned to himself. He left the phone booth without bothering to wait for any change that might be dispensed, deciding whoever came along to use the phone next could use it instead. *It'll be my good deed for the day* , he thought. As if hunting down killer robots and trying to prevent the end of the world wasn't good enough on its own.

He got back into the car and drove off down the road, heading towards Downtown. He wouldn't risk Mike or either of their families; for a start, if he didn't make it back then he knew his best friend would help take care of Kate and the kids. There was another option, he thought, grinning as he came up with it: *Regent-Burke.* "After all the shit jobs I've taken for them, and for two years' loyalty, they fucking owe me," he said to himself. Dominic and Brad were okay guys – *for Rangers,* anyway – and he reckoned if he told them the score he could convince them; or failing that he'd just pay them for a couple of guys to help him out. Hell; they took payment from oil companies to supply men to put the local people around the pipes in their place; as long as he stumped up the cash they'd take him up no matter how crazy his story.

Chapter 31

The black Mercedes pulled on alongside the kerb and came to a complete standstill. Cameron put the handbrake on and cut off the engine, leaving the three occupants of the car in silence, barring the muffled sounds of Burbank all around them. Other cars drove past them, people walked along the sidewalks. All around them, life went on, droves of people unaware that in less than a year the world as they knew it would be gone. Sometimes John wondered if ignorance was bliss. Maybe it'd be better to never know it's coming, or at least to not know the whole world rests squarely on your shoulders.

It didn't matter, of course. He *did* know what was coming, and he *did* know, from living in the future, that if they failed here it would fall to him to lead what was left of the human race. The world really did depend on him, either way. He had the information regardless of the fact he'd never wanted it, and he couldn't do anything else but act on it. Derek – *my Derek,* he thought - was right: *'humanity rises or falls on your shoulders.'* It still wasn't a fate he wanted but then he couldn't put it on anyone else, and even if he could, he wouldn't. He'd seen what happened when someone else tried to lead the fight back. *If you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself.*

"You sure this is the right place?" John asked Cameron, looking out her window at the target building. *Hong Kong House,* the sign above the entrance read.

"This is it," Cameron confirmed. She'd extracted their business address from one of the emails she'd found. She was certain.

"It's a Chinese Restaurant," Savannah pointed out.

"Regent-Burke's office is above it," Cameron looked up at the floor on top of the restaurant.

"Great," Savannah grinned. "We can get something to eat when we're done." The thought of eating something as exotic as Chinese food made her stomach grumble slightly.

"Maybe," John said flatly. "Let's just see how this turns out first." He opened his door and got out, checked his Sig was tucked into the waistband of his jeans, concealed by his jacket, and crossed past the car as Cameron and Savannah exited. The three of them stood on the sidewalk and looked for a side entrance. There weren't any so John guessed that they had to go into the restaurant itself to get upstairs. "Handy for them, I suppose," he said to the others. "They probably have quite a few business meetings downstairs; probably got some kind of discount with the owners for bringing clients here to eat."

John pushed the door open and held it for Cameron and Savannah to follow him in. A young Chinese girl, maybe twenty-one or so, and donned in Oriental garb, approached them a moment after they entered. "Would you like a table for three?" she asked politely.

"We're here to see Regent-Burke upstairs," Cameron replied.

"Oh. Carry on towards the restrooms," the waitress pointed to the left hand side of the restaurant. "There's a staircase just past it to the left."

"Thank you," Cameron smiled.

"Do you do takeout?" Savannah asked as John and Cameron started towards the rear of the restaurant. Both of them turned to her with identical questioning expressions. "What?" she turned to them with an innocent look on her face. "No harm in asking, is there?"

The waitress went over to the counter, pulled out a folded up menu and handed it to Savannah. She nodded her thanks, put it into her thigh pocket and followed after them.

John led the way up the stairs, finding a closed door at the landing on top with the legend *Regent-Burke Solutions* engraved in a small polished silver plaque on the wood. He pushed it open without knocking and passed through the doorway into a small reception. A middle aged woman in tidy skirt and blouse sat at a wooden desk, typing at a PC. It was a typical office setup for a small business, he thought. Completely innocuous to anyone who came in and saw it. On the opposite side of the room from the desk were three padded seats, for clients to wait for their appointments, he guessed. Two doors with similar plaques to the one at the main entrance were at the far side of the room, displaying the names Dominic Regent and Bradley Burke, respectively.

"Can I help you?" the receptionist asked warily. She looked down at her appointment schedule and saw there were none due for another hour. John, Cameron and Savannah instantly whipped out their pistols at the same time and pointed them at the woman, who gaped in terror up their barrels.

"Don't say a word," John said quietly.

"Oh god, don't kill me!" she blurted out, panic starting to set in.

"We won't if you stay quiet," Cameron said. She stepped behind the desk and stood next to the receptionist. She located the office phone and pulled out the cord, preventing her from using it to call 911. "Your cell phone," she held her hand out expectantly. The receptionist reached into her purse and pulled out a small iPhone with a shaking hand, and passed it to Cameron, who crushed it with ease in her palm.

She needed to ensure no signals got out, so Cameron opened up her wireless link and used it to jam the nearest cell tower. Nobody within a square mile would be able to call anyone with a cell phone.

"Get up," John commanded. Nodding, the receptionist unsteadily rose to her feet and moved out from the desk. "Against the wall," he said, keeping his voice down. He could hear someone talking on the

phone in one of the other rooms – it didn't sound like an emergency call, more like a conversation, so he reckoned they were in the clear for now.

The receptionist did as she was told but couldn't help staring at the gun John was holding. "Please, don't kill me," she sobbed. "I'm just a receptionist..."

"Shut up!" John snapped, pushing her back against the wall and pressing the barrel of his Sig against the back of her head. "Put your nose against the wall."

Sobbing, she did as she was told, as Cameron and Savannah watched. John pulled the gun away and smashed the handle onto the top of her head. She yelped once and dropped. Cameron reached out and caught her before she hit the ground, and gently lowered her to the floor, not wanting to create noise when she fell or to risk her undue injury. She checked her pulse and found it slow and steady. "She's alive."

A voice came from Dominic Regent's office and John kicked the door open to reveal a man in his late forties in shirt and tie, with broad shoulders, sat behind a desk and talking on a phone. He stared up at John in shock, his eyes wide as he tried to recall if he'd ever seen the kid before.

"Damien, I'll call you back," he said, placing the phone back into the cradle. He got up out of his seat, revealing that he was a full head taller than John. "Who the fuck are you?" he snapped. "Get out!"

John raised his gun up at the guy. "Dominic Regent?" he asked.

"Yeah. You want to put that gun down before someone gets hurt, kid."

"Check the other office," John told Savannah. The redhead opened up the office next door and found that it was empty.

"No one here," she confirmed.

John walked into the middle of the room, still holding the gun at Regent. "Move away from the desk," he turned to Cameron. "Check his computer and disable the phones," he told her. Cameron passed Regent and sat down at the desk. She started typing on the computer to check the files.

"You want to tell me what the hell you want?" Regent asked.

John's face set into a stony expression as he stepped up to the man. He may have been an ex-Ranger but he didn't look in too great a shape now. From what Cameron had said he'd been a few years out of the army; training and discipline would have been forgotten, and his body would have grown accustomed to the ease of civilian life. "You're dealing with a company called Kaliba; one of your employees – Andrew Knowles – is assigned to them. I want to know everything you've got about them."

"Sorry," Regent spat out contemptuously. "We don't give out confidential information about our clients."

Cameron stepped forward, planning to intimidate him into telling them what they wanted to know, but John shot forward and lashed out, cracking Regent in the side of the mouth with the barrel. He felt a *crunch* as the gun hit and blood flew from the man's mouth as he cried out, spattering onto the wall behind him.

Cameron stared at John, shocked at his sudden outburst. Savannah walked into the room as John grabbed Regent by the shirt, hoisted him up to eye level and smashed his forehead into the bridge of the man's nose, raining blood onto his shirt and John's as well. He clutched at his broken nose and cried out in pain but John was unrelenting. He tackled Regent to the ground and forced his knee into his stomach.

"Jesus," Savannah whispered under her breath at John's pure, savage aggression. She'd never seen him like that before, except for

when he'd attacked Weaver for trying to get John Henry to kill Cameron.

"Tell me about Kaliba!" John shouted.

"Fuck off!" Regent spat into his face, pelting John with bits of broken teeth and saliva mixed with blood. John wiped it off onto his jacket sleeve and roared out in aggression as he thrust his fist into Regent's broken nose again and again, stunning his opponent into a daze before letting him fall back onto the floor. "You're freaking psychotic!" He swiped at John and caught him in the temple, knocking him over and instantly rolling over to attack him. Savannah swept out and kicked Regent in the side of the head, knocking him away, and Cameron picked him up one-handed by the neck and held him a foot off the ground.

"Don't touch him," Cameron glared at Regent in anger, squeezing hard against his windpipe.

"Put him down," John told her, rising to his feet. Cameron complied and lowered him until he was standing, let go of his neck. John punched him in the face and sent him sprawling over his desk, where he disappeared behind it in a heap on the ground.

"Cool it, John," Savannah warned him. At this rate there wasn't going to be much left of this guy to interrogate.

Regent burst back up from his desk with a pistol in his hand, pointing it straight at John's head. "Get the fuck out of my office!" he roared. "You've got two seconds before I blow your fucking head off."

Cameron instantly sprang into action and thrust herself between the gun and John, and stepped towards her opponent. "Don't think I won't shoot you either," Regent snapped.

"Shoot me," Cameron replied without hesitation. "See what happens." She took a step towards him, causing him to back up nervously against the wall. The desk was between them but she

kicked it hard and split the heavy wooden furniture in half, a moment later it collapsed in on itself and she stepped through the remains.

"Who do you think you are?" Regent spat, afraid and disgusted. "You come in here, beat the crap out of me, destroy my office and start demanding answers about one of our clients. "What gives you the fucking right, eh?"

Cameron whipped her hand out and snatched the gun from his grasp before he could blink. John stepped out from behind her and approached him, holding his own gun. "Do you want to carry on like this?" he asked, holding the pistol up by his left shoulder, his right arm crossed diagonally across his chest as he prepared to deliver another backhanded pistol whip. "Or do you want to answer my questions?"

Regent stared at him and hesitated, anger striking him with indecision. John saw his fists starting to clench and immediately struck him across the face with his Sig once more, cracking his jaw, with a casual, detached look on his face that neither Cameron nor Savannah failed to notice.

Trembling, Regent stood up straight once more, blood dripping down from his shattered mouth, and looked up at the psychotic teenager and the two girls with him. The brunette one looked as insane as the guy – telling him to shoot her and looking so nonchalant about it. Who were these people? "Okay," he conceded, all thoughts of fighting had abandoned him now and he had enough sense to know when he was beaten. "What do you need?"

Cameron picked him up and gently sat him down on the chair at his desk, playing good cop to John's bad, in a way. She went back into the main reception area and filled a cup of water from the cooler, and went back into the room. But she didn't hand it to him.

"We told you," Savannah said. "Everything you know about Kaliba."

"How many mercenaries do you have assigned to them?" Cameron asked.

Regent breathed in through his broken teeth and the rush of air on exposed nerve endings sent shocks of pain through his skull. "We don't call them 'mercenaries;' they're private security contractors..."

"Answer the question," John snapped.

"Twenty-four," he answered, his speech slurring because of the damage done to his mouth. "Plus another seven to replace lost personnel: whatever they're doing is goddamn dangerous."

Cameron handed him the paper cup of water and he took it gratefully, holding it up gingerly to his lips he sipped a small amount and winced as the cold liquid tore through his broken teeth and he trembled in pain. He swilled the water in his mouth and spat it out onto the carpet, along with blood and more tooth fragments, and took another sip, this time swallowing it. Strange how she could be so detached but still seem to show compassion, he thought. Unlike that psychotic, callous bastard she was with.

"You've got two dozen men working for Kaliba, and you don't even know what they're doing?" Savannah asked, exasperated. "Are you really that stupid?"

"Most of our clients are oil companies, building contractors and so on. They want guys to escort their people into some very volatile places: Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Somalia; they want babysitters with guns. Kaliba offered us double the going rates in exchange for no questions asked; said they needed capable ex military personnel to act as a security force. They're paying us twelve hundred dollars a day, *per man.* Thirty grand a day, minus the employees' cut: this is the biggest contract we've ever had. We didn't see the need to rock the boat."

John had sat himself down on one of the other chairs in the office, as had Savannah. He leaned forward towards Regent. "You mean you

got greedy," he said, feeling blood rushing to his head in anger. Stupid bastards like this were the reason the world was going to end; all they cared about was money, power, or getting one over on their rivals without ever asking what might happen.

Cameron stepped behind him and put one hand on his shoulder, stroking the back of his neck with her thumb gently and calming him down some. He took a slow breath and let it out. "What about Knowles?"

"We know he's assigned to Kaliba," Cameron added.

"Andrew Knowles was a former sergeant from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force; been out a couple of years now. Impeccable record and seen combat in four different theatres of war; he's one of the best we've got. Kaliba wanted someone experienced to lead the security teams; we picked him.

"But something's gone wrong," he added. "He's gone missing. Kaliba said he walked off and abandoned his assignment."

"You don't agree," Savannah said.

"Knowles: hell no; he wouldn't do that. He's done a number of jobs for us and he's never, ever let us down once. We've got people with various special forces training on the books but they're not always as reliable as Andy Knowles. Since we took him on, he's never once refused a job, which I bet his wife's none too happy with."

"So what do you think happened to him?" John asked. He was curious about this Knowles guy now; the one his mom had knocked out in an alley behind Zeiracorp. Who was he?

"Family trouble, maybe. Official chat is he left the Marines to be with his family, but got bored of working nine-to-five and punching the clock. Knowles wouldn't quit without a damn good reason."

"And you didn't think it was a little bit suspicious?" Savannah asked.

"We were more pissed off; we're paying him twice as much as anyone else because he always leads whatever team he's assigned to, and he just vanished. We've stopped his wages and tried to call him at home and his cell, but nothing."

Forget Knowles, John thought to himself. It was probably a bum lead anyway.

"We're going to need files on everyone you have assigned to Kaliba," Cameron said.

Regent thought of resisting but he ran his tongue along the jagged edges of his teeth and thought again. *I've taken enough punishment for one day.* "Top drawer," he pointed to a grey file cabinet. "Marked 'Kaliba Group.'"

Cameron opened the draw and found the appropriate files. She closed the drawer and held them in her hand, returning back to stand next to John.

"Next question," John said. "Where's Kaliba based?"

"I really don't know," Regent replied. He saw John frown and reach for his pistol again and raised his hands up defensively in front of him. *"Really:* they always came here, or they called us. We've never been there. They've always been really secretive about whatever they're working on."

"What they're *working on,"* John said curtly, "is going to kill everyone you know." He almost added 'you dumbass' but decided against it. "Do you have a phone number, at least?"

"Yeah, we've got that," he answered. "A cell phone."

"Call them," Cameron said.

"And say what?"

"Doesn't matter," she said. "Just call them." She turned to John, a plan forming in her mind. "I can trace the location," she said to him.

John's face instantly lit up as she spoke. Now they actually had a chance of finding out where the hell Kaliba was. After so much searching he could barely believe they were coming so close. It had always seemed like an impossible task, that Skynet, the machines and Kaliba were always about fifty steps ahead of them. Cameron tracing directly to Kaliba could be risky, he thought back to what had happened at the safehouse.

Doesn't matter, he thought. If Skynet or Kaliba traced Cameron's efforts it would just lead them to this office, and he, Cameron and Savannah would be long gone before they arrived.

"Do it," he said, both to Cameron and to Dominic Regent.

Regent picked out the number for Kaliba and dialled it. As soon as he'd finished dialling the last digit Cameron took the phone from him. "Hey!" What the hell was she playing at? He was trying to help them, the bitch!

The phone rang and rang; the shrill beep repeated itself in Cameron's ear over and over. Finally it stopped ringing and went straight to an automated reply, instructing Cameron to leave a voicemail message. She made a quick adjustment to her vocal processors before complying with the computerised female voice. "This is Dominic from Regent Burke," she said, speaking in his exact voice. She considered for a millisecond what to say in the message, before deciding to base it on what Regent had told them. "We've got a little bit of a problem here; we've lost a lot of men under your employment lately and we're starting to look bad, we're getting complaints from a number of wives and there's even a threat of a lawsuit: we want to renegotiate the contract. Get back to me so we can discuss." She hung up the phone and looked to John. "They didn't answer," she said.

"Now what?" Savannah asked, dejected.

"Now we wait," John told her. "If they think these guys are trying to cut a better deal then they'll call back; either to negotiate or to tell them where to shove it. When they do, we pick up and Cameron can do her thing."

The phone suddenly rang and caused three of the four people in the room to jump in surprise. "That was quick," John said. Cameron watched the caller ID on the small green screen on the phone, matched it to the contact number Regent had for Kaliba, and picked up the handset.

"Dominic Regent," she answered, again imitating him perfectly.

"How can she do that?" the owner of the original voice whispered to John. He didn't bother to answer, just gestured that he should be quiet.

"Regent, it's Coleman. I just got your little message; I thought we had an understanding between us. We're already paying you premium rates for your personnel." Cameron connected to a number of satellites in orbit and beamed her signal back down over the entire south-western United States, interrogating every single cell tower and mast and using them to trace the source of the phone call.

"And we've lost a lot of men, Mr Coleman," Cameron argued back, wanting to keep the conversation going while she ran the trace. She'd already narrowed it down to the region bordering between California and Nevada.

"It's a dangerous job, which is precisely *why* we're paying you so much. The jobs you take on are dangerous by their very nature, Mr Regent: you should expect to lose a couple from time to time."

"But *not* seven men at once: an extra two hundred dollars per man, per day," Cameron said as she further narrowed it down. She'd confirmed one cell tower carrying the signal, giving her a location within a range of eighteen square miles. If she could keep him on the

line until she had three towers she could triangulate the signal and get an exact location.

"This isn't up for negotiation, Mr Regent: either you take the contract rates or *we* take the contract elsewhere; there are plenty of other private security firms out there."

"Not if we blacklist you," Cameron shot back, thinking quickly even for her. She'd gotten a lock on a second mast and she experienced a rush of anticipation as she interrogated even more masts in the region. There weren't many of them so she knew it wouldn't take long.

"Is that a threat?" Coleman asked menacingly. "That'd be very unwise. Now you can either keep the contract as it is or we can cut you out of the loop and pay your men direct: we can pay them each half of what we pay you and they'll still be better off. It's your choice, Mr Regent."

Cameron completed the interrogation and located the third cell tower, instantly triangulating the position of the call to a point in the Sierra Nevada Crest. She hung up the phone and faced John. "I've found them," she said.

"You're sure?" John asked hopefully. He trusted Cameron completely but this was just so big, so important, that he needed her to be certain. It wasn't one-hundred percent, however.

"The call came from a cell phone; it could be mobile," Cameron's voice returned to normal as she spoke to John. She used the roving backdoor she'd created in the defence network and took control of a recon satellite, altering its orbit so it was positioned directly over the Sierra Nevada Crest, and re-tasked it to take pictures of the region. Northeast of Mount Whitney, nestled on a large rocky plateau inside a ring of smaller mountains, was a large structure. She quickly checked through records and found no reference to a building in the area. It was desolate, remote, and unsuitable for commerce or business. She also searched through defence sites and found none,

not even on the classified top secret files. The call had originated from within the building: she had them.

"We should leave," she told John and Savannah. "Now: Skynet could trace us." She'd been careful and worked to mask her activities but it wasn't one-hundred percent. She had to assume that Skynet was smarter, more powerful and more capable than she was. It was safer to overestimate the enemy AI than underestimate it.

"No arguments there," Savannah muttered to herself as she got up and headed out into the reception area and down the stairs.

John turned to Regent and pulled his Sig out once more, pointing it at the man's head. "We were never here," he said coldly. Regent nodded sullenly and a second later John and Cameron followed Savannah down the stairs and back into the restaurant, which had picked up and gotten quite busy in the time they'd spent upstairs.

They quickly filed out of the restaurant and into the Mercedes, much to Savannah's dismay. She'd hoped they'd have enough time to order some takeout from the restaurant, but their priority was to get the hell away from the area before Skynet or Kaliba made the trace and realised that Dominic Regent hadn't been alone when he'd made that call. *Maybe later,* she thought. "We need to get some supplies," she told them. She wasn't just thinking with her stomach; they'd only salvaged three tins of food from the remnants of the safehouse, they needed enough to keep them going and although Cameron didn't need to eat, and she and John had experienced and were able to operate on empty stomachs, it wasn't something she wished to do again. She was fairly sure John would be thinking the same; neither of them would ever want to go hungry ever again.

"Stand with legs shoulder width apart, left hand cupped under the right... aim down the barrel, breathe out, and..." *Bang!* Danny's gun

barked out and kicked in his hands as he fired the shot. He composed himself again and fired another pair of shots.

"Put the safety on," Ellison instructed him. Danny turned the pistol around and took a moment to locate the safety before he flicked it on. Then the older man walked out to the impromptu target he'd made out of cardboard boxes and shelving from inside the gas station. He'd thought about using the old pumps but decided against it, just on the off chance there was some gas still inside. There was taking risks and then there was just plain recklessness; former Special Agent James Ellison was not a reckless person.

He strolled out the twenty yards to the closest target and checked the three holes punched through the cardboard box. "Three shots, three hits," he called out. "Better than last time," though the shots weren't even nearly close to each other. His grouping was terrible. It wasn't his fault, Ellison knew; today was probably the first time he'd ever fired a gun. Ellison himself had spent a few hours a week down at the firing range when he'd been an FBI agent. He hadn't kept it up after leaving, but the years of practice came back, as did his muscle memory and reflexes. He went back to the firing line, next to Danny, pulled his own handgun out and raised it.

"Don't yank the trigger," he patiently told Danny. "Squeeze it gently." He fired off two shots, switched aim to another target on the right, and fired another two. "Come on," he beckoned his student. The two of them went up to the boxes and Ellison pointed to his own bullet holes on the first target, about an inch apart in the centre of the box. "It'll come with practice," he told him.

"Aren't handguns kind of pointless against these things, from what John and Sarah have said? Why even bother with them?"

The question caught Ellison off guard for a moment. He had a point; no machine had ever been taken out or even injured with a pistol. You could fire at one, round after round, for a week and not even dent it with a 9mm. Even 7.62mm assault rifles weren't much good. "Any weapon's better than none," he said. "It might buy you some

time, and although there'll be machines, we'll also be fighting against people." It didn't sit right with him that they indeed would be fighting with and killing people. The Greys that Cameron said knowingly and willingly served Skynet – well, if they were killed he wouldn't shed any tears, but the mercenaries like Knowles probably had no clue what there were involved in.

They went back again to the starting line and Ellison took the pistol from Danny. They only had limited ammunition and they couldn't waste all of it on target practice or there'd be nothing left for when they did assault Kaliba. It was imminent, he knew. John wouldn't rest until he had Sarah back, and nor would he until Savannah was safely with them again. He thought about her and hoped she was okay. She'd be terrified out of her mind, he thought. Something like this could scar her for life. He'd seen the anger, sadness and regret in her older self's eyes, he'd seen the scars and he'd be damned if he was going to let the younger Savannah share the same fate.

He picked up an AK-47 and handed it to Danny. "When we go in, use one of these," he told him. Danny took it, hefted it for the weight, and put it against his shoulder like he'd seen a hundred times in the movies. "Finger off the trigger," Ellison reminded him, repeating Cameron's words from the day before.

"Sorry," Danny replied meekly. "I'm not good at this."

If Ellison were Savannah or Cameron, or Sarah, he might have said that was an understatement. But he didn't think shouting at Danny or putting him down would help him any. "Keep your finger straight, outside the trigger guard, until you're ready to fire. And only point it at something you want to shoot."

"It's heavy," Danny commented as he brought the rifle up and lined up the iron sights.

"And it's simple to use," Ellison replied. "They designed these to be used by conscripts, kids younger than you, about John's age, with only two months or so of training. It's the most widely used gun in the

world because it's so simple even a kid can work it – in some countries they do." He knew John had probably learned how to field strip one of these since he was elementary school age. Instead of math books he'd had field manuals, route marches and timed runs through the jungle whereas other kids would have had gym classes or swimming lessons. John was used to the lifestyle, and so, sadly, was Savannah. Sarah was too, and Cameron was literally built as a machine of war. He'd had some training in rifles, shotguns and pistols, but Danny was essentially a raw recruit, and it was up to him to make sure that the son of Miles Dyson had at least a chance of not ending up the same way as his father.

"Slot the magazine in firmly," he said. Danny fumbled with it for a moment before sliding it clumsily into place. "Pull the cocking handle back with your left hand." Again, Danny did as he was told, pulling it back all the way and letting it go. "Tap it forward to make sure it's gone all the way."

"Done," he said.

"Put your right foot behind you so you don't lose balance when you fire," he said. Danny complied and waited for his next instruction. "Lean into the rifle slightly... a bit more... good. Feel the safety catch at the top of the grip."

"Got it," Danny acknowledged.

"Press it down until you hear a click, and then again until you hear another one." Again, Danny did as instructed. He was good at that, but nobody would be in a position to play teacher when it hit the fan, Ellison thought warily. "Click it back up again twice," he said. "Listen to me, Danny. When the safety catch is all the way up, it means it's on. First click down is for rapid fire, second is for single shot," he decided against using terms like automatic and semiautomatic, not wanting to confuse the kid. He had a lot to take in over what could well be a small timeframe; he wanted to keep it as simple as possible. "Tell me again."

"One click down is rapid fire, two clicks is single shot."

"Good. I only ever want you to use single shot, okay. Rapid fire's a waste of bullets unless you know what you're doing. Now aim at the furthest target and fire four shots in your own time."

Danny clutched the rifle tighter to his shoulder, carefully lined up the front and rear sights onto the far target, aiming at the cardboard box, and fired a shot. He fired again, three more times, and without being told to he flicked the safety catch all the way up and put the rifle down onto the ground. Ellison picked up an M4 and peered through the scope at the target. "You're better with the rifle," he said. All four shots had hit and they were closer together than the pistol target. The target was a hundred yards away, roughly, and the closest bullet holes were three inches apart. They were spread out but not as much as with the pistol. Danny had potential, he thought, but they didn't have the ammunition to waste getting him up to standard. They had six magazines each for the three AKs, and similar amounts for the M4s. He decided he could expend this one magazine training Danny, and when it came to it he'd take an AK47 and just have thirty rounds less for himself. It'd be worth it if the miniscule amount of extra practice could make any difference in keeping Danny from getting killed. He seemed to be okay with patient instruction, firing out here in the middle of the desert, undisturbed and in his own time. But they were just cardboard boxes atop shelving racks dug into the dirt of the desert floor; they weren't concealed, they weren't moving, and they weren't firing back. He just hoped Danny wouldn't fall to pieces when bullets whizzed past his head and the real fight began.

A deep, low rumbling echoed throughout the interior of the Mercedes and caught both John's and Cameron's attention. Both of them recognised it instantly; Cameron having easily located the source of the rumbling and John having experienced it for himself almost throughout his time in the future.

"You're hungry," Cameron turned around and said to Savannah.

"A little bit, yeah," she shrugged, playing down the empty, hollow feeling in her gut and her body's screaming out for food. Now they were in 2009 and she'd escaped the hellish, barren war torn wastelands of the future, and she'd had a number of proper meals in the days since they'd returned, her body was almost constantly screaming out for calories to make up for seventeen years of deprivation.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Cameron asked; they'd passed a number of stores and fast food restaurants, and Savannah had remained silent.

"I didn't want to make a fuss," Savannah replied. "Not like I haven't been hungry before."

John thought about that for a moment; he felt much the same now, after only three months in the future; seventeen years, he guessed, would make anyone salivate like a dog at the mere thought of food. He remembered how Derek had told him he and his team had eaten in Century Valley Mall until they'd puked, after they'd come back in time. Plus, he thought, none of them had eaten in almost a day, and the hunger pains started to return. He'd started to get used to eating properly again, and when Kaliba had blown up the safehouse they'd taken all the food with it.

"Pull in at the next place you see," John said to Cameron. "We'll get Danny and Ellison something, too."

"We should find a supermarket," Cameron said back to him. "So you can eat healthier." She didn't want him to make himself ill by eating too many rich, sugary and fat laden foods so soon after arriving back in the present, before his body could learn to cope with it again.

"It might be healthier but this is faster. The quicker we get back to Ellison and Danny and we figure out a plan, the quicker we can save Mom and Savannah."

"I second that," Savannah added. She hated the idea of her past self – just a kid – being held by those bastards. "They're probably torturing them."

"Probably," Cameron replied.

"Is that what you'd do?" she asked, leaning forward between the two front seats and looking to Cameron.

"I would have, before," Cameron said.

"What do you mean, before?" John asked, curious about the changes she'd been going through. He doubted even she understood them.

"A terminator would torture them," Cameron explained. She hoped they would understand. She thought they would; they were both intelligent, especially John. And he knew her better than anyone else. "But I'm not a terminator anymore."

Savannah stared at her, confused. How could Cameron not be a terminator anymore? She had to be the most enigmatic, confusing machine ever created, she thought. She was still armoured, tough as hell and worth any number of men put together in a fight. "How'd you mean?" she asked.

John smiled slightly and looked to Cameron as she drove. He thought he had the answer. "You're not programmed anymore," he said, both to her and to Savannah. "My birthday, when you reverted back to Skynet's programming, and then switched back again. You didn't fall back on resistance programming at all; you chose to protect me."

A matching smile creased Cameron's mouth in satisfaction: John understood her perfectly. "I don't have a mission other than what I decide for myself," she said to Savannah. It wasn't technically true, she knew. The order to kill John was still there, buried within the depths of her programming and ingrained into her very being. John

knew it and was willing to take the risk. Until two nights ago she hadn't been, but then he'd convinced her. Could she ever convince the others of that? Possibly Savannah, but Sarah never would. She decided it would be best to keep it a secret between her and John.

"So... what are you?" If she wasn't a terminator, then what was she exactly?

"I'm Cameron," she explained.

"Ah," Savannah didn't get it. She liked Cameron – she *never* thought she'd say that about a machine before – but she didn't understand her. She wasn't sure if she ever would.

They were currently out heading towards Big Bear, only twenty miles from the disused gas station that was their new safehouse, and driving on a long, straight desert road with no other cars in sight. It had taken them ages to get out of LA but now they were making good time on the open, clear road. Cameron still kept them at 55 miles per hour to avoid attracting attention from any vehicles they did cross, in case they were unmarked patrol cars.

She spotted a sign for a service station and food up ahead and bore right, ready to take the turning off the highway for it. "We need gas, too," she said, looking at the fuel gauge on the dashboard; it was less than a quarter full. She continued on and the station drew into sight. She saw it was not just a gas station but also had a mechanic's shop, a burger bar and a small store. It would do for what they needed. She took the turning off the road, slowed down with the brake and pulled right into the parking lot, fitting dead centre between the lines with accuracy only a cyborg could achieve. There were a few other cars parked in the small lot, the likely owners of which were stood at the pumps and a few at the burger stand.

Cameron turned the engine off and they sat in silence in the car for a moment. She and John both simultaneously looked out all their windows and searched for CCTV cameras. Finding none, John opened his door and stepped outside. He felt the sun beating harshly

down on him and within moments started to sweat again. He noticed that Savannah too was visibly sweating; neither of them had yet become acclimatised to pre J-Day California yet. He mentally shrugged it off; he'd gotten used to the bitter cold and being constantly starving, a little discomfort was something he'd learnt to live with in the future so he reckoned he could certainly deal with a little heat.

"Cameron and I will get some food," John said to them, "Savannah: you fill up with gas."

Savannah shook her head at him. "How about Cameron and *I* get the food, and you fill up with gas – we need a little girl-talk."

"I should stay with John," Cameron replied. She didn't want to leave him out of her sight in an unknown place when they were being hunted by both the authorities and Kaliba.

"I'll be fine," John said. He didn't know what 'girl-talk' Savannah wanted but he figured it'd be good for Cameron to spend time with someone other than him. Whether or not they managed to stop Skynet it'd be better all round if she could have another friend. The more the merrier, he thought, knowing from experience what the exact opposite of it was like to be alone.

Together, Savannah and Cameron headed for the burger bar and left John to full up at the pump. She smells of frying beef and onions wafted into the redhead's nose and instantly her stomach's rumbling increased in anticipation. "Smells good," she said as they stood to wait behind a mother with a small boy.

"I don't know what 'good' smells like," Cameron replied.

"Really?" That didn't make sense to her at all. "I'd have thought you could smell things?"

"I can," Cameron said. "I detect scents and odours, but I don't know what smells good and what doesn't." Cooking meat smelled good to

humans and animals because it signalled food; they'd adapted to associate certain smells with certain things and qualities. She didn't have that; her sense of smell had been designed by Skynet to detect traces of humans, to smell them out, in essence.

"So nothing smells good or bad to you?"

Cameron thought for a moment. There was one scent that was pleasing to her. "John," she answered.

"John?" Savannah looked at her strangely. "If you haven't noticed, he's sweating like a pig, just like me; he's not exactly smelling like a rose garden." *Literally or figuratively,* she thought.

"If I smell him, he's nearby and I can protect him," she explained. She'd learnt to associate John's scent with satisfaction and happiness, because it meant he was close.

"About that," Savannah started awkwardly, hesitating for a moment, unsure of how she should bring up what she needed to with Cameron, while John *wasn't* nearby. "I'm getting worried about John," she said. Before Cameron could make any reply she continued. "You saw how he wasted that mercenary out in the desert."

"He shouldn't have done that," Cameron agreed. The man would have died anyway but a part of her – she thought she knew which part – was uncomfortable with John having killed him. He'd been unarmed and no longer a threat; technically John had murdered him.

"It was *afterwards* that worried me," Savannah said. In a way she thought shooting the guy in the head was a mercy killing; if she was left out mortally wounded in the desert, all fucked up and bleeding out, she'd be glad if someone took her out quickly. She looked around and saw John finish filling the car up and going inside the store to pay. "How he just kept shooting – he went nuts. The only reason he stopped firing was because he ran out of bullets."

"He's been through a lot," Cameron defended him.

That wasn't an excuse for Savannah, however. "So have I. So have you. I know he's gotta be hurting inside after Sarah was taken, but I think it's starting to get to him. I heard him crying in the shower the other morning. And he just went *ballistic* against that Regent guy; I thought he was gonna kill him. You know what I'm talking about."

Cameron nodded slowly. She knew exactly what Savannah meant. John was under a lot of strain with the loss of Sarah, on top of which it was possible he was suffering from post-traumatic stress, after his time in the future. But what she didn't know was what Savannah was expecting. The woman in front of them and her son received their food and stepped aside, and Savannah and Cameron stepped forward.

"What would you like," a teenager running the stand asked politely.

"Five double cheeseburgers and five large portions of fries – big as you can make them," Savannah flashed him a sweet smile.

"Coming up," he smiled back and promptly got to work fixing their food up.

Savannah turned back to Cameron and decided to put all her cards on the table. "I think he's starting to crack, I think it's all too much for him, and I'm thinking maybe someone else should take the reins. I'm thinking *you."* Savannah knew she herself was no leader; if they wanted something shot, blown up, or to beat the crap out of someone, then she was their girl. But she knew she wasn't leader material.

Cameron processed her words carefully. She didn't deem Savannah to be a threat to John but she could see the woman was having doubts about John's mental state. Ellison was, too. She felt conflicted; she believed in him. She trusted him as he trusted her, and she didn't want to break that. But at the same time she shared Ellison's and Savannah's concerns for him. He was under a severe

amount of mental stress and was displaying symptoms indicating he was approaching a nervous breakdown. She also found it strange that, for the first time in three timelines, someone had suggested that she – a machine – take command. She'd heard the rumours in her future that she was actually commanding the resistance and not John. They were untrue, of course, but that hadn't stopped them from spreading and taking route – leading to Jesse and Riley's attempt to turn him against her. Someone actually suggesting she lead them was an alien concept to her.

"John's in charge," Cameron insisted. She could see her opposite's features drop slightly and knew that wasn't what Savannah had hoped to hear. It didn't matter; she was loyal to John. "I'll talk to him," she added. She wasn't blind; she could see he was reaching the limits of his mental and emotional endurance. If he did break she would take control, for his own safety, but for now she had faith in him.

"Make sure you do," Savannah said quickly as John approached. "We can't afford him to lose it." She liked John; he was a good friend and he cared about people. But his outbursts had unsettled her; apart from defending Cameron against Weaver, she'd never seen him explode like that.

The guy running the burger stand handed out two large white carrier bags with their food inside. Cameron didn't wait for him to tell them how much; she handed over thirty dollars straight to him. "Keep the change," she told him. She turned away from the stand and walked towards John.

"You got the food okay?" he nodded at the bags in Savannah's hands.

"Double cheeseburgers and fries all round," she said as they all headed back to the car.

"What were you talking about?" he asked. "You two seemed unusually chatty." Cameron and Savannah got on, he'd noted. They

seemed to like each other okay, but neither of them were really conversationalists, yet he'd seen them chatting away like a pair of normal girls.

"Just girl talk," Savannah said as she opened her door and got into the back seat, putting John's shopping bags and their burgers next to her and resisting the urge to tear them apart and devour one.

"Ah, okay," John said, disinterested as he and Cameron got in and the latter once again took the wheel. She pulled them out of the parking lot and back onto the main road, heading north towards their new safehouse. He wasn't fussed about girl talk; he just wanted to get back to Ellison and Danny and work out exactly what they were going to do, and get out there and find his mom. Every second wasted was another moment where they could be doing God only knew what to her, and standing around like this made his blood boil. After visiting Regent-Burke he'd started to come up with a plan while he was inside the station, paying for their gas and for the other food and water he'd bought. He thought it was a good one – the only workable one he could think of, anyway, but he had a feeling the others weren't going to like it.

The human leader of the Greys, Coleman, looked down at the soaked, unconscious forms of Sarah Connor and Savannah Weaver, still tied down to their beds and securely restrained. For two days they'd had her, and she hadn't told them anything useful.

"She's strong," he said to Nagase. "We torture her and she gives us nothing, then watches the girl get the same treatment and still keeps her mouth shut. Baldy was wrong about her."

Nagase shrugged his shoulders. "Or she really doesn't know anything."

"If she doesn't then we're better off killing her now," Coleman said. "She has a knack for escape."

"Baldy says to keep her alive," Nagase reminded him. "We can use her to draw out John and his allies. We need something right now, the way this is going." Coleman nodded knowingly; things hadn't gone to plan lately. The ambush team they'd left behind had failed to report, so he had to assume they were dead. They had no idea where Connor was, and right now their main supplier of personnel – Regent Burke – was trying to wrangle more cash out of them. They needed some good news and they needed it soon; either Connor's head on a plate or something else just as good.

"Coleman, Nagase: please report to the AI: we have a development." At the sound of the intercom both men turned to leave the room and nodded to the two armed guards beside the door.

"Watch her carefully," Coleman warned them as he passed through the door. They silently marched through the corridors of the complex, knowing better than to discuss their secret matters out in the open where people could hear them. They had so many people contracted out working for them that they only discussed certain matters in designated places.

They descended two flights of stairs, taking them into a subbasement level, and continued on until they reached the room in question. There was another armed guard in front of it, and the two Greys passed by him without a word being spoken. He knew they were among the few people allowed access to the room and didn't try to challenge them. Coleman entered the room first and saw one of his fellow turncoats, Townsend, stood in front of a set of TV screens hung from the wall at the far side. To the right was the AI – housed in a large black casing and protected behind three inch thick bullet proof glass. The walls were reinforced concrete with plate steel behind them. The only access to it was through a thick steel door with a combination lock, and only Baldy and Steroids knew the combination, which they changed at midnight every day. If you didn't have the code it would take a tank to break through it.

Coleman looked up at the screen and saw a rapidly moving image, very similar to the displays projected from the cameras beneath UCAVs that their pilots used to control them remotely. The image was dark despite the obvious green glows from infrared image enhancing being used, and he could see the obsidian waters of the sea whizzing past at the bottom of the screen. The horizon was visible only through the infrared, and there was nothing visible on it just yet. A HUD display was on the screen, constantly changing and altering every second. A second TV screen showed a similar image

"What's going on?" Coleman asked. Neither he, Baldy or Steroids had ordered any Dragonflies up into the air after the strikes against Sarah's safehouse and the warehouse in Downtown LA.

"Skynet ordered it," Townsend said.

Nagase glanced at the man, surprise apparent on his face. "Come again?" he asked. He'd known just like the others that Skynet was already self aware, but it was still shocking to hear that Skynet had initiated... whatever it was doing.

"Skynet ordered two Dragonflies to be armed: one Harpoon each."

"I'll be damned," Coleman breathed. He'd seen the crews working on the two drones but he'd assumed it was simply another test of their anti-surface capabilities, and that Baldy or Steroids had signed off on it. They only had a pair of AGM-84 Harpoons and they were supposed to be used to sink a decommissioned frigate in a few weeks as another display to the air force. If Skynet had done this by itself, then what was it doing? "Where are they now?" he pointed at the images on screen.

The screen on the left changed, the camera images from the Dragonfly disappeared and instead displayed an image of the world in 2D, then zoomed in to the west coast of the US. A red dot slowly moved across the expanse of blue to the left of California, and a small line ran from their location to the dot. "Northern California

coast, about eighteen miles out from San Francisco," Townsend replied.

"What's Skynet doing?" Nagase asked.

The map image on screen disappeared and was replaced by a photograph of a warship in dock, light grey in colour and brisling with missile launchers, radar dishes and antennae. At the front was a small red star, and beneath the image bore the legend: *Varyag.*

"Whatever it's doing," Coleman realised, "we're not running this show anymore." Skynet was not only self aware but was now even planning its own covert operations. The AI was coming into its own and very soon all their years of hard work would come to fruition. He felt slightly intimidated at how alarmingly fast Skynet was developing, and Sarah's words rang in his head. *The second you're no more use to it, it'll kill you.* He shook it off; this was war and he'd picked his side long ago. He just had to make sure that he remained on the side that won.

Two aircraft streaked through the air at extremely low altitude, only fifty feet above sea level and practically skimming the waves that gently rolled below them, creating a trail of spray in their wake. They were sleek, insect like, and moved with single minded purpose towards their goal. These aircraft flew themselves autonomously; they could adapt their missions and engage an enemy if they were attacked, but were not intelligent per se. They were smart drones at best, controlled by an intelligence superior to any on the planet, rivalled only by one other entity.

They flew low to avoid radar detection, and kept their own radars off to avoid giving out a signal, instead receiving constant, real time updates from Skynet, who maintained watch on their target via satellites in orbit, all to keep the mission top secret.

TARGET DETECTED: DISTANCE 80 MILES

INITIATE ELECTRONIC COUNTERMEASURES

The two drones accelerated towards their target and increased altitude. As they did so they initiated the second stage of their mission parameters, and engaged their electronic countermeasures. The crew of the *Varyag,* eighty miles away, now saw radar screens filled with approaching aircraft, ghost signatures carefully devised to fool their targets radar tracking systems. The ship's radar operators would now be watching the signatures of six F/A-18D Super Hornets approaching them.

Both aircraft pulled up to two-hundred feet above sea level and activated their targeting radars. The only vessel within miles, the *Varyag* was an easy target to locate.

TARGET ACQUIRED

TARGET IN RANGE... RADAR LOCK ACHIEVED

AGM-84A HARPOON SELECTED... WEAPON ARMED... RELEASING WEAPON

The two AGM-84A Harpoon missiles skimmed the waves and flew below the *Varyag's* line of fire. Its own missiles streaked through the air to chase phantom missiles and ghost aircraft, whilst the real weapons tore through the air towards their target. The ship did not simply take the attack lying down, though. S-300 surface-to-air missiles blasted into the air from the vessel and the sky filled with sheets of 30mm auto-cannon fire as the *Varyag* did everything it could do to protect itself. Surface to air missiles shot into the air at a tremendous rate to engage not only the incoming missiles but also the phantom Hornets. The ship turned away from the missiles and slowly accelerated to its full speed of thirty-two knots, trying everything possible to evade the incoming missiles.

An S-300 missile tore towards the two Harpoons and detonated, throwing out a rapidly expanding cloud of metal fragments that caught one of the missiles and shredded the missile body. It lost power and plummeted down to the sea, exploding harmlessly against the water. The second missile continued undeterred and closed the distance to the ship within moments. It smashed through the steel hull of the cruiser and penetrated inside the ship, exploding a second later with tremendous force that rocked the vessel and tore a gaping hole in its side, just below the waterline.

Thick black clouds of smoke poured from the ship and billowed into the air, and within minutes it started to list to one side. Crew jumped into lifeboats which were then dropped into the sea. Unbeknownst to the two drones, the *Varyag's* captain remained on the bridge long enough to send a radio message, a mayday message asking for assistance for his crew. Their mission was accomplished and the two aircraft turned back towards the shore.

A second transmission was also sent, before the captain abandoned ship with the rest of his crew. A message back to Pacific Fleet HQ at Vladivostok, detailing how his cruiser had been attacked, unprovoked, by American fighter aircraft, that the ship was sinking and they were ditching into lifeboats. The message arrived at its destination and was received, but not before it was intercepted by an eavesdropping entity. The artificial intelligence known as Skynet experienced a sense of satisfaction at what it had done. The first stage of its operation was successful; now it had to wait for events to unfold before it could implement stage two.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! The *Varyag* is actually a real Russian Navy ship that visited San Francisco last year (though without incident) and thought I'd put my own little spin on the event! Please do let me know what you thought of the chapter :-)

Chapter 32

"Fucking traffic," Knowles sighed as he pushed down gently on the gas, moving his far perhaps three feet forward before he had to once again brake and stop the car. It was rush hour and he'd made maybe half a mile in the last hour. LA traffic was pretty bad at the best of times but this was verging on the ridiculous and he was sorely tempted to just get out and walk; it was only a few blocks down to Regent-Burke and he could make it in less than ten minutes if he went by foot.

To distract himself from the agonisingly tedious wait in the congested traffic, he switched on the car radio. The first station was some annoying pop crap – some little kid who sounded like he hadn't hit puberty, singing *baby, baby, baby...* over and over again - the sort of junk his youngest daughter Amy listened to. He wondered what she was up to; she'd been pissed when he'd stopped her from taking her iPhone and laptop with her when he'd sent her away. And he hadn't even seen Melissa before he'd gone. He hoped she hadn't kept calling Simon the whole time; for starters he didn't want Mike charging him for a massive phone bill, but mostly just in case Kaliba were listening. He just hoped they didn't know every detail of his family's life and who they were friends with.

He switched the station from the annoying, prepubescent pop crap, and hopped from channel to channel, hoping to find something he liked. "Doesn't anyone listen to rock anymore?" he wondered aloud. He knew what his daughters would say to that, and found himself glad they weren't in the car with him.

He switched station once more, a song he didn't recognise that was just finishing. *"And now for the hourly news update: Disaster struck last night when a Russian Navy ship sank twenty miles off the coast of California. The missile cruiser* Varyag *was sailing to San*

Francisco on a scheduled port call when it – the ship's captain claims – was attacked by American fighter aircraft. Nineteen sailors were killed outright and another twenty-four wounded – six critically – and the survivors have been rescued by the Coast Guard.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has responded with fury to the Varyag *captain's claims and in heated discussion with President Obama, has demanded an official apology plus compensation for the loss of the ship, and for the families of the deceased sailors, and has promised reprisals if those demands are not met. Obama has issued a statement of regret at the loss of life and injury to the Russian sailors, but he and military officials deny any involvement at the sinking of the* Varyag, *claiming no US aircraft were in the area at the time . We'll have more on this story as it develops."*

"Jesus Christ," Knowles muttered, shaking his head at it all. It was probably a massive breakdown in communication: some swabby didn't get the memo about a Russian ship paying a visit, scrambles a jet piloted by some trigger happy fucking brownshoe, who was probably already in the shit with his commanding officers who were doing their best to sweep it under the carpet. "Goddamn navy," he sighed. Overpaid and underworked, in his opinion.

He knew what would happen; there'd be a lot of rhetoric, a lot of threats thrown about, and Uncle Sam would publicly deny everything while at the same time doing some under the table deal with the Russians. It was all about saving face; nobody could ever take accountability for their actions anymore.

Finally, he got through the traffic and pulled up at the side of the road outside Regent Burke and Hong Kong House. He parked up and left, and made his way into the front entrance. The pretty young Chinese waitress smiled, recognising him as he walked past the front desk. "Hey, Andy," she said, knowing why he was here. "Same as usual?"

"Salt and pepper king prawns and fried noodles," he nodded and smiled politely.

"Are you ever going to try anything new?" she chuckled. "You always order the same thing every time I see you."

"Next week, I promise," he said as he went towards the staircase off to the side at the back.

"It'll be ready in ten minutes," she replied as he ascended up the stairs. He pushed open the door to Regent-Burke's office and stepped inside. The reception desk was empty, he saw. Hannah, their receptionist, was conspicuously absent, which he found strange in itself; she'd never not been there, not once in all the times he'd come in to see Dominic and Brad. She'd always known just how he liked his coffee, too, and had always brought him in a steaming cup when he'd been in meetings with them.

Dominic Regent limped out of his office towards him, and Knowles could barely believe the sight of the man. "What the hell happened to you?" he asked. Regent's face was a mess of bruises and cuts, he could see his two front teeth were missing, his arm was in a sling and he had strips across his broken nose.

"Fucking teenagers," Regent groaned, lisping as the air he exhaled when he spoke whistled out the gaps where his two incisors used to be.

"Fucking *LA,"* Knowles nodded. "Hate this city. So what happened: did you get mugged?"

His opposite shook his head. "Some punk, about nineteen or twenty, broke in here, knocked Hannah unconscious – that's why she's not here today – and beat the crap out of me."

Strange, Knowles thought. It wasn't like they had anything of value here, so why would anyone break in? There were plenty of antiwar anarchists out there, who'd be all too happy to smash up the place, but it wasn't like the company exactly advertised themselves or anything. "What did he want?"

"Forget it," he said defensively. "What's been going on, Andy? You disappeared from a job and no one's seen you in days."

"Kaliba, Dom: they're not the guys we want to be working for." Dominic poured himself a coffee from a machine on a table behind the reception desk and then did another one, putting two spoonfuls of sugar into it and handing it to Knowles, who sipped it slowly.

"I'm getting that impression," Dominic said quietly. "But they're our customers, Andy. You know the line of work we're in, here; we're not exactly the Red Cross. You're telling me you're here to quit? You know no one's gonna pay as good as we do for this kind of work."

"Yeah," he nodded. "I'm coming off the circuit. Sorry, Dom, but I've gotta think of my family here."

"You realise we can't pay you for the last week since you've not actually been on the job."

"I don't care about that," Knowles said. "There's one other thing you *can* do for me, though."

"You need a reference?"

Knowles shook his head and took another sip of the coffee. "I need a team," he replied. "As many guys as you can spare." He didn't know how many it would take; Steroids had laid waste to a whole police station back in '84. He'd take a hundred guys if he could get his hands on them, though he knew that wasn't likely.

"For what?" Regent stared at Knowles, his curiosity piqued. "What're you up to, Andy? What've you been doing since you disappeared.

"I'll show you," Knowles pulled out sheets of paper from his pocket. He'd gone back to another internet cafe and done some more research, and he'd found a hell of a lot. "You ever heard of Sarah Connor?"

"Sure; nut job who hated machines, she was all over the news a couple weeks back."

"Well, Kaliba were *very* interested in her. I've been doing a little digging, and here's what I found." He put a sheet of paper with a mug-shot and details of Sarah onto the desk for Regent to look at. "Eighty-four: Sarah Connor is stalked by two men. A Kyle Reese and an unknown male; the former was arrested with her and the latter slaughtered his way through seventeen police officers to get to Sarah and Reese before all three disappeared."

Regent took the sheet and examined it closely. "I don't see what this has to do with anything." Knowles pointed at the image of Steroids, in sunglasses and black leather jacket, holding a shotgun and an AK-47 as he obliterated the police officers who stood in his way.

"This guy – the one who was after Sarah – he's Kaliba's head of security. He's been the one giving me orders. He's a machine; there's another one to and so is he." He saw the doubtful look on Regent's face and decided to press on. *"I saw it,* Dom: they're machines. The guy Sarah Connor and this Reese guy said was a machine is working for Kaliba, and they're building an AI for the military. She was right." He put down more papers for him to see. "September, 1999: a substitute teacher attempts to shoot a kid called John Reese – later identified as John Connor. Witnesses claim the shooter had a mechanical leg. Then Sarah and John blow themselves up in a bank. October, 2007: actor George Lazlo kills twenty FBI HRT officers; *one survives.* James Ellison. He's featured prominently in security footage for Zieracorp – Kaliba's rival – alongside Catherine Weaver, and Kaliba were just as interested in her as they were Sarah and John Connor. They ordered us to eliminate Weaver and her AI. Six weeks ago Sarah Connor reappears and is arrested. Look it up online; she looks the same this year as she did in ninety-nine. Something's going on and Kaliba reeks of it. You see where I'm going, here?"

Regent looked down at the 'research' Knowles had done and smiled. The smile grew broader and he started to chuckle, "Are you sure

you're okay? I'm the one beaten up but seems like you're the one with the concussion."

"I know it's real," Knowles insisted. He pulled out his wallet and took his bank card out. "I didn't think you'd believe me, but I know you'll believe this." He put the card down onto the desk. "I'll pay for a team, same rate as Kaliba offered. Four guys plus weapons for a twenty-four hour job: forty-eight hundred dollars." This was a hell of a risk, he knew; Kaliba could track the transaction from his account. "You've got my account details; just don't take out the money until after I've gone – at least an hour."

"Andy," he looked down at the photos on the papers Knowles had shown him and a chill ran down his spine as he recognised two of the people on it. John Connor and an unknown young brunette woman: *they're the ones who beat the shit out of me.* The girl... she'd changed her voice, exactly like his. She couldn't be one... could she? "No," he shook his head vehemently and pushed the papers back towards Knowles. "I'm having nothing more to do with Kaliba; I'm cancelling the contracts and pulling the men out." He'd gotten in far too deep here; the money was great but he was losing men left right and centre, he'd been assaulted in his own office, by John Connor and a girl who might actually have been a machine. "Forget it," he said, "whatever you're up to I don't want any part of it." He handed the card back to Knowles.

"Ten grand," Knowles offered, knowing he probably sounded as desperate as he felt. His wife would kill him if she found out he was going to spend so much money on this but he really had no choice.

"Sorry, Andy," Regent shook his head regretfully. "Word of advice: just leave this one alone." He pointed at his swollen, bruised face and his slung arm.

"Thanks a lot," Knowles grumbled and turned to leave.

"One more thing," Regent blurted out, feeling a slight pang of guilt over turning Knowles down. He was their best employee and had

done everything they'd asked for; there was something he could do for the man. It wasn't much but it was better than nothing. "John Connor was here. He's the one who kicked my ass. He came here with two women – one of them was the unnamed girl in the photos you showed me."

The ex-Marine turned back to Regent, his heart racing in excitement at this new information. Why hadn't he said so before? "What did he want?"

"Information on Kaliba: where they are, how many men of ours they have, that kind of thing."

"Do you know where they are?" Knowles asked quickly.

"Kaliba, or Connor?"

"Both," he snapped. Finally he had some kind of development now; if he couldn't get men from Regent-Burke then maybe he could find John and Sarah Connor. Who better to fight alongside than the two people who knew more about these things than anyone else?

"I don't know where they went, but they seemed to know where Kaliba was. The girl said she'd traced their exact location. No idea how; you need police or military scanners for that kind of thing, satellites. She just dialled them and claimed to know where they were."

"Somewhere in the Sierra Nevada Mountains," Knowles surmised. "They can't get there by road..." if they were trying to get there then the only way would be to fly. "I think I know where they went," he muttered. He marched straight out of the office and down the stairs into the restaurant.

"Here's your food, Mr Knowles," the waitress held it out.

"Thanks," he pulled twenty dollars from his wallet and pressed it into her palm as he took the bag of Chinese food from her. "Keep the

change" he said as he quickly rushed out the front entrance and headed towards his car. A traffic warden was walking towards the front of his SUV, a clipboard and pen in hand.

"Back off!" he snarled at the warden as he approached.

"You're parked illegally, sir, I've gotta write you a ticket."

"Unless you want that ticket shoved up your ass, go find someone else to write up," he snapped, looming threateningly over the smaller man. He himself was a little over six foot and just under two-hundred pounds, and cut an imposing figure over the shorter, plump traffic warden, who instinctively backed away. He unlocked the car, got inside, put his food into the footwell of the passenger side and hit the gas. The car sped out from the side of the road and he left the unfortunate official in his dust. He knew where he had to go now; where he had the best chance of meeting the Connors – if not there then at least at the final destination. The hard part would be getting there without getting caught or killed first.

Four aircraft tore through the grim, grey, featureless skies over northwest Alaska in a sharp arrowhead four-ship formation, flying in at just under the speed of sound. Captain Vladimir Svetkov looked out of the canopy of his SU-30 Flanker-C and down at the grey and white, barren icy abyss that zipped by underneath. He had a respect for anyone who could live in such a place; as a boy he'd grown up in Siberia and knew how harsh it could be there. Anyone who lived in such frozen isolation was inevitably tougher, more self sufficient than those who lived in easier, fatter parts of the world. Still, respect or not, he had a mission to fulfil; to avenge the sinking of the *Varyag.*

"Distance to target: sixty-eight miles," his co-pilot, Mikhail Zorlev, announced from the seat behind him. "ETA: four minutes."

Vladimir pursed his lips nervously beneath his oxygen mask. They'd already penetrated American airspace and so far they'd seemed to have avoided detection, but how long that would last for he didn't know. He ran a check on their weapons and found himself glad that if they were spotted, at least they were well armed. Two jets, including his own, were armed with two short range air to air missiles, two long range ones, and a combination of eight antiradar and laser guided missiles, whilst the other two were armed purely for air to air combat. It was a very dangerous mission and they'd been equipped accordingly.

"Detecting radar emissions," Mikhail alerted him. He detected the radar beams sweeping over them. "They've spotted us," he said a split second before a warning alarm sounded.

"It couldn't last forever," Vladimir muttered. "All aircraft descend to three-hundred feet; disappear under their radar curtain." He pushed down on the control yoke and pushed his Flanker down towards the ground. A moment later the other jets in the formation also descended to join him, and together they made for the deck.

"Aircraft incoming," Mikhail reported, urgency and dread in his voice. "Radar cross section is very small; they must be F-22 Raptors."

"Shit!" Vladimir cursed under his breath and pulled his jet into a sharp turn. They had very little chance fighting F-22s like this, not against stealth aircraft.

"Attention unidentified aircraft: you are violating US airspace and must turn back immediately. Please acknowledge."

"Do we engage?" one of his other pilots asked over the radio.

"Wait!" Mikhail shouted. He looked at his screen and saw the tiny radar signatures of the F-22s were moving away from them. "What are they doing?" he wondered aloud. They were headed in the wrong direction, turning at a right angle from them. Did the American pilots even know where they were?

"Unidentified aircraft," the American pilot repeated, his voice sounding urgent and confused. *"If you do not move to exit US airspace immediately we will be forced to engage you. Please respond."*

"They can't see us," Vladimir grinned. The F-22s still turned away from their position and increased their speed. What did they think they were doing? There was nothing in the direction they were heading; the American pilots were chasing ghosts. "Keep an eye on them," he told Mikhail. "All call signs continue onto target, but be careful."

The four Flanker-Cs remained low and increased their speed, hugging the ground as they approached their objectives. They split into pairs and their courses diverged as they moved to attack two targets simultaneously. One jet in each pair had the anti-surface weapons whilst the other provided top cover. "Target is in range," Mikhail said. Their particular target was a long range radar site. "Activating targeting radar... locked on."

Vladimir quickly selected his antiradar missiles and armed them. "Firing," he pressed the launch button and a pair of missiles blasted out from under his wings, they streaked forward towards the base, several miles away, leaving a long trail of smoke in their wake. He pushed the nose down and pulled the yoke right, turning away from the target as the missiles continued on their course, soaring out of sight and beyond the horizon to their target.

"Impact in three... two... one... we have a kill!" Mikhail said excitedly. The radar emissions he'd detected disappeared completely. "Radar station has been destroyed."

"Foxtrot Bravo: second radar station has been eliminated."

"Continue on to engage secondary targets," Vladimir said with a wolfish grin on his face as he turned towards the coordinates of their next objective, another radar site some hundred and twelve miles away. After that they would have to turn around and head back

home, but until then he was determined to blast a wide open hole in the Americans' radar nets.

The gas station looked just as desolate and abandoned as it had when they'd left it; John took that as a good sign; at least Ellison and Danny hadn't been attacked by Kaliba after they'd gone. He was wary about splitting up any further, and resolved that from now on they'd all go everywhere together – and armed to the teeth. He moved away from the car and started across the forecourt, towards the main entrance of the station proper. He could smell gunpowder in the air, just faintly, and looked around, reaching for the grip of his pistol and tightly holding it. There were no signs of a struggle but that didn't mean there'd been one. When terminators were involved there usually wasn't much of a fight.

"Welcome back," Ellison called to them as he opened the door and stepped out to face them.

"Hey," Savannah nodded to him, a smile on her lips, genuinely pleased to see him. As far as emotional gestures went that's about as much as she gave, and of course she kept it reserved for Ellison; even if he wasn't the one who'd looked after her all those years he was essentially the same man.

"Anything happen while we were gone?" she asked him. "I can smell gunpowder."

"Oh that! It was nothing; I just gave Danny a shooting lesson."

"He any good?" John asked.

"Probably not," Cameron replied. She spotted small piles of spent casings and quickly counted them up; it was unlikely anyone would become proficient at shooting after only firing thirty rounds.

Ellison shrugged his shoulders and moved away from the entrance, towards John, Savannah and Cameron, and hopefully out of earshot of Danny. "He knows which end the bullets come out of."

"Great," John muttered, a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "He can take the rear when we go in."

Savannah and Ellison both looked at him, confused. John had been silent on the way back from their stop at the service station and hadn't told her anything. And Ellison naturally knew nothing of his thoughts, having spent all afternoon teaching Danny the basics of surviving a shootout.

"We 'go in' where?" he asked.

"I'll tell you inside," John replied. "I'm starving. Savannah: get the food from the car."

Savannah did as he asked and went towards the car. Ellison rushed out to help her, and together they carried the fast food and the other shopping John had bought across the forecourt and into the station. John followed after them but Cameron reached for his arm and held him in place. "We'll be one minute," she said to Ellison and Savannah, and let the door close in front of her and John.

Her charge turned around and looked at her, confusion set in his features. "What's going on?" he asked.

"We need to talk." Cameron strode towards the Mercedes and John, sensing whatever it was it was important, followed after her. She got into her usual driving seat and John sat next to her. He pulled his door closed and sealed them inside the car. It was stuffy and uncomfortable inside the Mercedes; the windows were up and the air conditioning was off. Cameron had the keys so he couldn't just switch it on himself. They'd only got out of it two minutes ago but the baking desert heat just pushed the temp up and up.

"What is it?" John turned to face Cameron as he asked her, hoping they wouldn't be in here for long. He was already starting to sweat.

Being a cyborg, Cameron was never one to mince with her words. "The others are worried about you," she told him flatly. "You've been acting strangely."

John blinked. "Strangely?"

"At the safehouse, when you killed the mercenary."

He didn't hesitate at that one." You'd have killed him too," he replied. He didn't see what she was getting at.

She'd anticipated John's comment and already thought up a reply before he'd finished the sentence. "I wouldn't have kept firing until I ran out of bullets," Cameron said. "I wouldn't have shouted as I shot him. You've killed before and shown regret, but not this time. I'd like to know why."

"Why, Cameron?" John said tensely, a hair away from snapping. He felt himself getting hotter and he tried to keep his temper cool. He sucked in a long, slow breath and forced himself to calm down, seeing for a moment what she meant. He'd have never gotten so worked up a week ago over this. But still, he had his reasons. "They blew up our safehouse and kidnapped my mom and Savannah; that's why. I was pissed off."

It didn't seem like much of an answer to Cameron. "Was it the same when you attacked Dominic Regent?" she asked. She decided again to get straight to the point. "You've been through a lot but you can't afford to let your emotions control you, John."

"That's easy for you to say," John shot back. He regretted it the instant he said it, but he carried on, wanting to elaborate on what he really meant and not what she'd have come to expect from him, given how he'd raged against her in the past. "You're in control; you're always in control. They've put me through hell my whole life,

and then I *actually was* in hell. Then I come back; I've got you, I've got mom, we're all back together and things are finally looking up, and they rip my world apart again. You know the kind of people we're dealing with, Cameron; how am I supposed to act, knowing what they're probably doing to her right now?"

It wasn't often that Cameron was speechless, but this became one of those occasions, as she found herself unable to respond. She imagined if it were John who'd been taken; she'd never done it before but she created a scenario in her mind, where John had been captured and she was in his actual situation. She'd inherited some of John Henry's moral instincts but she knew, deep down, that she would have coerced Regent the same as he had. She'd have made the same decisions, but she wouldn't have been prone to the emotional outbursts that he'd displayed. It wasn't his actions she was concerned with as much as the mental and emotional state behind them.

"You're wrong," she said, sadness in her eyes and her voice. "I don't have as much control as you think."

"The kill order," John swallowed knowingly. She nodded and looked straight at him.

"I don't know if it will ever resurface. If it does I don't know if I can stop it. I can't control it, and you've lost control yourself lately. I'm worried about you too."

He paused and let that sink in. Cameron was afraid of something. Despite what his father had told his mom; she knew fear, and she was afraid for his sake, and nothing else.

"Ellison and Savannah, isn't it," he said to her. Not accusing, not angry, just matter of fact. "Are they both behind me, still?"

She decided not to tell him that Savannah had suggested she take the lead. "For now," she answered. "I said I'd talk to you."

"And you?" John asked nervously, knowing this was the all important question. If the others decided they wanted out he wouldn't try to stop them, but he needed Cameron to be on his side; he couldn't do this without her. "Are you still behind me?"

"No," Cameron answered plainly. She saw the look in John's eyes instantly and recognised the pain and betrayal, and realised she needed to word her response better. "Not behind you," she said, "beside you." Her place for as long as she lived would be at John's side, whatever happened.

John reached for the back of her head and pulled her towards him as he leaned his own down until their foreheads rested against each other. In the stuffy, hot confines of the car their sweat mingled where the skin touched but neither one of them cared. "Thank you," he said quietly to her. She'd just reaffirmed to him that she was with him on this, all the way and no matter what the outcome, no matter how batshit crazy he went, she'd be there to help him, and if necessary, he realised, to guide him back into line. *Did she do this for Future Me?* He asked himself. Was she this much of a rock for his future self in another timeline? If so, had he fallen apart after she'd left? He searched his own soul and knew the answer to that, and determined that under no circumstances would he ever, in a thousand years, send her away.

"I know what I'm doing," he told her. "Trust me."

"We should go back inside," Cameron finally said. "They're waiting for us."

Together they left the car and went back into the station, to find the others already tucking into their meals. Savannah munched happily on her double cheeseburger and savoured the taste of the fried meat, onions, cheese and ketchup as they danced across her palate. It was over an hour cold but she didn't care; anything was better than eating rodents and algae. There was a whole world of different foods out there to be tasted, and she decided that when they stopped Skynet she was going to try them all. The world around her was

barely there; it was just her and her food, and as she judged the scene around her, she was happy to keep it that way.

Danny ate his burger quietly, as did Ellison. John and Cameron sat down with them to make a rough circle, and the former opened up his own food. Despite having shared Savannah's life for three months and turning ravenous at the sight of any pre-war food, he ate mechanically and took no real pleasure in it. He couldn't anymore. He was entirely focused on the shit that had happened in the last few days, and how he was going to put it right. He took another bite and a dollop of ketchup dripped from atop the meat and splattered onto his chin. He didn't even seem to notice. He only reacted when Cameron reached out and wiped it from his chin with her thumb. Her touch shook him back to the real world and he turned to her as she licked the ketchup off her thumb and memorised the sensations it sent to her tongue.

"You okay, John?" Ellison asked nervously.

He nodded once, his face a blank slate. "I'm thinking."

"Don't let it turn inward," the older man told him. "It wasn't your fault."

"It wasn't anyone's fault," Savannah said. She knew Cameron assumed she was responsible for hacking the defence net and for Skynet tracing her. And John had already blamed himself.

"It doesn't matter whose fault it was," he replied. "It matters what we do about it."

Both Ellison and Savannah looked at him, sharing his sentiment. They both wanted Little-Savannah back. The older Savannah didn't want her younger self to be tortured, to be traumatised, and turn out like her. She wanted her mini-self to have a chance at a normal life – something she'd never had and probably never would. This was normal to her, and she wouldn't wish that on anyone else. Ellison felt a bond towards the younger Savannah; he felt responsible for her, and the thought of what she must be going through pained him,

angered him, even. Sarah was strong and she could probably withstand their interrogations, at least for a while. But Savannah was just a kid; she didn't deserve any of this, and he shared John's thoughts exactly. They had to get them back and they had to do it soon.

"About that," Danny said. "Have we got some kind of plan?"

"We know where Kaliba are," Cameron took out a map that John had bought and placed it on the ground. She pointed to a spot east of Mount Whitney, along the Sierra Crest. If Sarah and Savannah hadn't have been captured she would have accessed the defence network again, hacked into Creech air force base and ordered several Reapers armed with rockets and bombs so she could launch airstrikes, but now it would be too dangerous: she couldn't do it without risking Sarah's or Savannah's life.

"We know where their mercenaries come from, and we know they get into LA via Oxnard Airport," John said, pointing at its location on the map. "We know a silver helicopter ferries them to and fro; we head there, wait until a helicopter shows up and the goons depart, and then we take it."

"Small problem," Savannah commented. "None of us know how to fly a helicopter."

They all knew it was a good point but it failed to deter John one bit. "The pilot does," he said. "We do what we have to, to make him fly us there. We've got weapons and we've got the element of surprise."

"So we fly in, storm the place, grab Savannah and Sarah, and get out?" Ellison asked. "We don't know how many we're up against."

"No," John shook his head and picked up an M4. He opened up the grenade launcher and slotted a 40mm explosive round into the breech before closing it and pumping the slide. "We do," he nodded at Cameron.

"Twenty-four mercenaries," she said. "All ex military." She'd read the files of each man assigned to Kaliba. All of them had been frontline soldiers, mostly infantry, and most of them had combat experience. She wasn't as concerned about them as something else they hadn't discussed, however. "Plus an unknown number of terminators," she added. She'd fought the one who'd attempted to kill Savannah but there would be more. They were developing and protecting Skynet; its future incarnation wouldn't leave a single machine in charge of such an important mission. That worried her. She could deal with humans without a problem; terminators were different.

John opened a bottle of water and took a long swig, processing what Cameron had said. It sounded like quitting talk to him but he knew she wouldn't do that. "We've got the LAW, launcher grenades, and the sniper rifle. And we've got Cameron."

"And *they've* got unmanned drones," Danny shot back. He realised he probably sounded like he was a coward, and maybe he was, but he wanted to survive this. Getting themselves killed did nobody any good. "You're talking about flying us through a swarm of them to then take on an army. We won't make it through all that."

"I'll deal with that," Cameron smiled. She'd maintained a wireless link to the internet and had been searching for any news online, and she'd found something that had caught her attention. "Get in the car," she told them all. She got up and headed outside, quickly followed by the others as they stepped after her, into the harsh, hot air of the desert, and crossed the forecourt. The air inside the car had heated to an unbearable degree, and John couldn't help but think of those ads about people leaving dogs in hot cars. He was still unused to the heat and now he reckoned he knew how they felt.

Cameron once again sat in the driving seat and turned the radio on, switching stations until she found the one she wanted. "Listen," she instructed.

"Tensions with the Russian Federation have increased to levels not seen since the fall of the Soviet Union, as president Medvedev

claims responsibility for the bombing of four radar installations in western Alaska. The Russian President announced the airstrikes against air force installations were in retaliation for the sinking of the cruiser Varyag *twenty four hours ago. Heated discussions between President Obama and the Russian Premier have taken place, with neither side backing down. The President has stated any further aggression will be dealt with swiftly, and The Pentagon has upgraded to DEFCON three. The last time the system was upgraded was just after 9/11. We'll have more on this story as it comes to us..."*

Cameron turned off the radio; there was nothing new the broadcast would tell them.

"It's terrible and all," Savannah said, still eating the last of the fries she'd taken with her, not wanting to waste food. "But how exactly is this relevant?"

"It's Skynet, isn't it?" John replied nervously. "It's starting already."

"Probably," Cameron nodded. "There's no record of military aircraft assigned to the area where the *Varyag* was attacked." She performed a rapid search and found no missiles had been expended. All combat aircraft on routine flights had returned with full payloads.

"But Skynet doesn't trigger J-Day until next year," Savannah said. "July 8th; we've got ten months yet."

Danny tried to get his head around it, still finding it hard to believe Skynet could have come so far along, how could it be the AI he'd created? He'd have thought it'd be years away from practical application, not already trying to start a war by itself. "So... Skynet sinks the *Varyag,* knowing the Russians will retaliate and create tension, escalating it where it deems necessary, leading to the eventual Judgement Day."

"In my future," Cameron said, recounting what Future-John had told her before. "Skynet's nuclear strike was unexpected; the Russians

launched a counterattack but many of their missiles failed to launch. Thirty percent of those that did never reached their targets."

"Skynet's trying to start another cold war," Ellison summarised. John nodded grimly, realising the older man was right.

"If Russia's on alert when Skynet launches then their missiles will be better maintained, and they'll fire everything they've got," John said. "It's about killing off more of us right at the start; taking out assets here that it missed the first time around, making sure *we* can't fight back afterwards." It was all about him again, he realised. Skynet had already taken his mom, Savannah, smashed their safehouse and left them with very little to fight with, and now it was planning to do the same in the near future; taking out anything that could be remotely useful to any resistance movement.

"We're not letting it get that far," he said, barely holding back the anger that threatened to boil his blood and explode outwards. "Pack the guns; we're moving out to Oxnard Airport in five minutes. This isn't just a rescue mission anymore; we're going to kill them all." He wasn't going to rest until every last Grey and every single machine that wasn't Cameron was dead at his feet.

"I've got something that can help," Cameron added. She understood Skynet's motivation behind the attack, and under other circumstances it would have been a sound strategy. But there was one thing Skynet hadn't accounted for and it was her. It knew she existed but the other AI did not know what she was capable of, nor was it aware of her shared experiences with John Henry in the future. In creating tensions between the United States and Russia, to the point that the White House had upgraded to DEFCON 3, it had provided her the perfect opportunity to modify a previous plan and enact it without suspicion. She immediately opened up her connection to the defence net once more and gained almost instant access. She tapped her temple, where her chip was underneath her hyperalloy skull and then looked to the others, then up into the air. Danny and Ellison stared at her, confused, but both John and

Savannah looked at each other and then back at Cameron, the pair of them understanding completely what she was talking about.

A loud knock on the door snapped Coleman's attention up from his computer screen, and he found himself glad that he had a distraction from the more mundane, tedious little bits of housekeeping and admin that seemed to come with the territory of secretly building an AI and a machine army to help it take over the world.

"Come," he called out, looking towards the wooden door as it opened. Colonel Schiff, their air force liaison, entered the room in his normal blue office uniform, pressed immaculately as always, though Coleman could see the bags under his eyes and knew he'd probably been suffering from lack of sleep. Skynet had kept them all informed of the developments and the Russian airstrike, so he wasn't surprised that the man looked like he'd been run ragged. "Robert," he got up and extended his hand. "I wasn't expecting to see you here for another couple of weeks."

Schiff shook his hand and took the seat on the other side of the desk, facing the Grey. "Have you been paying attention to the news?" he asked, sounding as tired and harassed as he looked.

"That I have," he replied. "I'm sorry to hear about it; how many people were killed?"

"Only four, thank God, and thirty-eight wounded; nine are critical."

"How did it happen?" Coleman asked, feigning concern. He knew *exactly* how it had happened and exactly how four Russian strike fighters were able to penetrate US airspace and evade their F/A-22s so easily. Still, he had to keep up appearances; *I'm only a businessman, after all.*

"NORAD located them on radar and Elmendorf scrambled fighters but some dipshit in a control tower misplaced a zero and send our birds on a wild goose chase while the Russians ran roughshod over us."

Coleman had thought that was a particularly brilliant move by Skynet; using the roving backdoor Charles Fischer had installed to gain access to NORAD, and altering the data sent from the radar dishes to the screens in the control room to send the intercepting fighters to the wrong place. From the data he'd seen it had even created ghost signatures for the jets to follow, leaving the Russian planes free to bomb their targets at will. He rested his elbows on the desk and leaned forward. "Forgive me, Robert. It's tragic, but I don't see what it has to do with us."

Schiff grinned wryly. "You don't? Well, I thought you'd be more on the ball than that. The fighter control officer who directed our birds has been taken off active duty and is under investigation for incompetence. An order's been issued that all fighter control staff are to receive enhanced training, but there's a growing number of top brass here who are starting to feel that no matter how much training, human error – however rare – is inevitable, and it's something we can ill afford. As of right now we're on DEFCON Three and exercise Blue Star has been cancelled."

Coleman stared at the officer in shock. They couldn't afford for the exercise to be cancelled; they were on an extremely tough deadline here. He was glad for Schiff's sake that it was the pair of them discussing this, and that neither Baldy or Steroids were present right now; he dreaded to think what the two terminators would do to him. "Care to explain?" he asked, feeling himself go red.

"Because the President and the Pentagon have upgraded to DEFCON 3, all exercises and all leave have been cancelled. The good news for you is that because this attack could have been prevented, because it came down to human error, those in the Pentagon who are AI sceptics have either been converted or silenced, and the Skynet Funding Bill comes before congress next

week." He leaned forward slightly and laced his fingers together. "We're expecting it to pass. I've also been told to make you an offer," he said. "As you know, we've been developing a number of advanced, autonomous UCAVs for some time, but from what I've observed nothing we're currently fielding comes close to your XQ-84 Dragonflies." The fact they were designed from the ground up to work with the AI, and their agility and loitering capability was something that his superiors had been drooling over. And that wasn't even taking the impossibly reasonable price that Kaliba was asking for.

"The Pentagon has decided to shelve all current UCAV developments in favour of your aircraft. I've been authorised by my commanders to put an offer on the table, Mr Coleman: Three-point-four billion dollars for an initial order of one-hundred-and-eighty-six Dragonflies."

Coleman sat back for a moment and pretended to consider it. He'd known for a good long time that the air force would come around to adopting the XQ-84s: when they were selling them for eighteen-million each, less than half the price per unit of what the likes of Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and BAE asked to put their prototypes into production. Having the designs thought up by Future-Skynet and downloaded into Baldy's and Steroids' chips, enabling them to skip all research and development, had helped keep the price tags low, all to entice the military into buying their drones over anyone else's, and ultimately their AI.

"I thought that was going to be after the exercise," Coleman replied. He was actually very surprised at how fast this was all going. Skynet's tactic had been to sway the military into adopting it, but to accelerate it this much was beyond anything his and the others' wildest dreams. He could imagine the top brass squirming in their seats as they tried to explain how it had happened. He didn't know who they'd be more pissed at: the Russians for launching the attack or their own guys for failing to stop it. Heads were going to roll, and Skynet would be there to take their places.

"I think we can call it a deal, colonel," Coleman shook his hand once more. He got up and Schiff also got to his feet. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll show you a little more of what we're doing here; we've got a few more designs I think you'll be interested in."

Creech Air Force Base, Nevada

Despite the heat outside, Lieutenant Greg Archer swigged on his coffee and savoured the rich caffeine as it worked through his system. He'd been paying attention to the news just as everyone else had, and he and the boys were half expecting war to be declared any moment. It was a tense time for everyone in the military; a few of the guys in his platoon had their leave cancelled and were pretty pissed about it. "Fucking DEFCON," he muttered to himself, quietly voicing the sentiments his guys all felt but he, as a sergeant, couldn't air aloud in front of them. His leave had just been cancelled, he'd booked a week in Rome with his wife in just under a month for their tenth anniversary, and if things didn't get settled soon he could see what would happen to that. *Forget the Russians,* he thought to himself. *If they want to see World War Three they should just tell my wife we won't be going on vacation.*

He sat at his desk and scrolled down the list on his computer of all the avionics and engineering checks that had been run on the aircraft they were responsible for. Now more than ever, with tensions rising with the Russians, they'd been told they needed all aircraft operational and ready to go. NORAD installations in Alaska had been bombed, The Russians were reportedly preparing to mobilise their Pacific fleet as a show of strength, and the top brass wanted to show off their own by ensuring the west coast was secure. That included all manned and unmanned aircraft at heightened alert.

Another computer screen beeped as an incoming message came in. Greg turned from the first screen and looked at the second as his 2ic, Staff Sergeant Dan Spender, also peeked at it. Spender opened

the message and saw a list of orders. He whistled as he read it, not quite believing what he was reading. "Jesus, sir," he said. "This can't be right, can it? They want a third of our force armed for air to air combat and on Alert-Five status. Who the hell sent this?" They'd never used their drones for aerial combat, outside of exercises. Yeah, they were capable of it but generally they used jet fighters for that, not Reapers. Part of him wondered if this wasn't just a joke.

"That's what the order says," Archer shrugged. He looked at the order and who it was signed by. "It's come from SECDEF, that's his name signed right there; it's gotta be right."

"Still though, eighteen Reapers and four X-45s – they're still experimental, not even meant to be used in combat yet."

"Well consider this their baptism," Archer replied. "We've got our orders; get the guys on it: I want all these aircraft armed, fuelled and cleared for sortie in four hours. We're not at war yet, Dan, but you never know what's around the corner." No damn way was he going to get caught with his pants down like those poor bastards up in Alaska. Too much time spent in the cold wasn't good for a man and he wasn't surprised someone made a mistake up there.

Within minutes his platoon had received their individual orders and had begun working on the designated UCAVs. Bombs and missiles were rolled out on wheeled racks and were fixed underneath wings and into bomb bays. Avionics technicians worked on the electrical components whilst mechanics and engineers made sure the drones wouldn't fall out of the sky. Greg looked again at the list on screen and admitted privately that it was a hell of a lot.

The Russians were preparing to mobilise their entire Pacific Fleet as a show of strength; this move must be part of ours, he reckoned. Still, there was such a thing as overkill, he thought as he looked at it in detail. Twenty-two aircraft equipped with enough AMRAAMs and Sidewinders between them to take out the entire air force of a small country. The guys in charge were clearly expecting some serious shit

to go down, and he figured if it came to blows then at least with the UCAVs none of their pilots would be at risk.

He watched the work as the drones were inspected, calibrated, tested, fuelled and armed, a handful at a time, and found himself glad that nuclear weapons hadn't been included in the arsenal for the X-45Cs. *That's something at least,* he thought. Still, as he watched his men at work and thought about what it was all in aid of, what it could come to if this thing didn't get resolved peacefully, he found himself getting nervous. *I can kiss Paris goodbye,* he thought glumly. His wife was going to kill him.

Chapter 33

Cold: the only thought, feeling or sensation that came to Sarah was of the wet, frozen, bitter cold that seeped into her bones and caused her to shiver uncontrollably in her restraints. She was still wet from the waterboarding and the bastards had turned the air conditioning to full blast; the combination of which made for a harsh, uncomfortable experience even between the bouts of interrogation. She had to consciously fight to stop her teeth from chattering.

Beside her she could hear Savannah crying, sobbing loudly to herself. Sarah hated herself for it; she couldn't have prevented them from torturing the poor girl, no matter what she'd told them they'd have done it to her anyway that first time, just to show they meant business. But she'd been torn between protecting John and looking after Savannah, and her indecisiveness had been costly. They'd continued on relentlessly; waterboarding Savannah a number of times, not even bothering to ask Sarah anything and ignoring her shouts, screams, and finally her desperate pleas to leave her alone.

"Savannah, are you okay?" she asked, looking across at the shivering, wretched form of the minute redhead on the table next to hers.

"I want to go home," Savannah sobbed, tears streaming from her eyes. She'd been crying for an hour straight and repeating those same five words over and over, and Sarah felt guilty that it was starting to grate her nerves, adding to the list of things she felt bad about already.

"Why are they hurting us?" she asked. She didn't know what she'd done wrong, or why they were hurting her.

"They want John," Sarah said simply. "We'll go home soon," she added, trying to sound reassuring. She looked around the room again, searching for anything that could help her to escape, just in case she missed it on the previous umpteen times she tried. There was nothing at all, not even a paperclip. She reckoned Kaliba must know about her knack for survival and prepared accordingly. Either that or the slap-head machine that had done most of the interrogating was just being meticulous; it was hard to tell which, not that it mattered.

The machine in question, stood in the corner watching them, approached upon hearing her words about going home. "You can go home when you tell us the location of your son, Catherine Weaver and the AI." *Bullshit!* Sarah thought; if they found John she knew both her and Savannah would be executed and buried out in the desert.

"Until then you will continue to suffer." Baldy grabbed the hose again and held it over Savannah, but looked towards Sarah. She watched in horror as the machine went about its work and fastened another length of cling film over Savannah's face, and Sarah started to cry herself.

"Okay," she said to Baldy, a few tears rolling down her cheeks. For days she'd had to watch as the machine tortured Savannah. Luckily she'd passed out quickly each time, a small mercy, but that hadn't made either of their suffering any easier. After the last bout Sarah had decided it was time to say something; they'd been interrogated for two days, and she reckoned if she gave them something now they might believe it.

Baldy put the hose down and moved towards her. She noticed that he didn't shiver from the cold like she and Savannah did; a flaw in their infiltration capabilities and one that could be used to spot them, she thought. *Assuming I live long enough to tell anyone.*

"Please be more specific," Baldy said to her.

"I'll tell you something, if you leave her alone," she gestured towards Savannah.

"What information do you have?"

Sarah gulped and tried to calm herself. He could read her like a book, the same way Cameron could. Baldy put a hand on her arm and she knew what he was doing; scanning her for any signs of deceit. She'd been thinking hard about a story and had repeated it over and over to herself in her head, she knew she had to all but believe it herself to pass muster with the machine, and the best lies were based on some truth.

"We had a house in the Calabasas Highlands," Sarah said, trying hard to picture the house they'd moved to after John's sixteenth birthday. She knew that what she'd said was technically true; that had been their home for a good while. "We used it before I was arrested." She imagined the living room, where they hadn't spent much time; the bathroom, and how she'd scrubbed the dried blood off the floor from Riley's suicide attempt, and their neighbour Kaci. She tried to vividly imagine every detail in her mind's eye. *Believe it yourself and they'll believe it,* he told herself.

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Baldy asked. Sarah had to laugh, surely that was so obvious it didn't need to be explained even to a machine. Cameron understood it.

"He's my son," she replied, incredulous she had to spell it out for the tin can. "Why would I give him up?"

"Indeed," the terminator said simply, though the tone of his voice was what caught Sarah; the question he didn't need to ask: Why would you give him up *now?* That one word caught Sarah off guard and she realised the machine had just been playing dumb, had led her into it. She'd underestimated the terminator and she couldn't afford to do so again.

She looked across to Savannah, who watched them with tears dropping from her eyes as she whimpered silently, her voice stolen by the cling film sealed across her lips. "To save her," she said, swallowing a lump of guilt for what Savannah had been through, and what else she'd doubtlessly be forced to endure. "Leave her alone, let her go, and I'll tell you more."

"Give me the address and tell me how many accomplices John has, and Savannah Weaver won't be harmed anymore."

"She needs to eat," Sarah added, both for Savannah's sake and because she figured trying to bargain might make her seem more convincing than giving it up front. "Food and water; she hasn't eaten in two days."

"The human body can last several weeks without food," Baldy countered. "She'll survive."

"She eats, or no deal," Sarah glared at him.

The T-888 stared back, not looking particularly impressed. "If there's no deal I'll resume the interrogation."

"Just give her some food," Sarah shot at the machine.

Baldy paused for a moment. He hadn't expected Sarah to bargain with him like this; her position was highly dubious and he could easily ignore it and continue to torture the child. It would achieve the same results ultimately. "Tell me how many occupants and I'll arrange for food."

"Just Cameron and Danny Dyson," Sarah sighed.

"Cameron?" Baldy looked at her, confused. He was unaware of any associates named Cameron.

"The tin miss – terminator; she calls herself Cameron."

Baldy found that very unusual; machines didn't give themselves names except to use as an alias. John and Sarah were clearly aware of the machine's identity, so why did it continue to use a name when it wasn't necessary? There was a more pressing question, however. "Where are Catherine Weaver and James Ellison? We know the AI was present at your safehouse before we captured you. Where is it now?"

What fucking AI? Sarah racked her brain trying to work it out. "You mean John Henry?" she asked.

Another machine that assigned a name for itself, Baldy thought. Such freethinking machines were a danger to Skynet; they couldn't be allowed to exist. "Yes, where is it?"

Sarah realised the extent of what the Triple-Eight was asking, even if it wasn't aware of it. As John had told her, John Henry had merged into Cameron, become a part of her, and the liquid metal masquerading as Catherine Weaver had given her some serious upgrades to be able to take on Skynet; if they knew where Cameron was then they'd stop at nothing to destroy her, and in doing so they'd find John.

"I don't know where Weaver and Ellison are," Sarah said. "I told you they left; they never said where they were going. The AI's in Calabasas with John." She looked up at the machine and wondered. "Why's this AI so important? I thought it was John who was the biggest threat." Kaliba had invested so much in trying to eliminate Weaver and Zeiracorp, and this John Henry AI, but she hadn't thought until now why exactly. Kyle had told her John beat the machines. Surely he was their main target?

"John Connor led the human resistance against the machines; his strategy of reprogramming captured terminators was effective. An AI allied with John Connor, controlling machines for the resistance, is a threat to Skynet."

Jesus, Sarah mulled over the implication of his words. John allied with an AI was the ultimate threat to the machines. *Cameron:* the machine didn't know it, but they were talking about Cameron. She'd felt sick to her stomach seeing her son naked with the terminator but she'd decided to allow it, for John's sake. The fact that not only was John so dependent on Cameron but that the fate of the entire human race could soon balance on his son's closeness with her was deeply, deeply disturbing.

Baldy paused for a moment before deciding on the next course of action. He went back over to Savannah and picked up the hose. Savannah struggled and turned her head away but Baldy reached out and pinned her in place with his free hand and held the hose up above her.

"I told you where he is," Sarah protested. "I told you."

"I want the address," Baldy said.

"One-thirteen Freemason Way," Sarah snapped, remembering their old address. "Just leave her alone."

The terminator dropped the hose to the ground, ripped the cling film from Savannah's face, about-turned to the door and promptly left Sarah and Savannah alone in the room. The young redhead started sobbing and crying again, and watching her almost reduced the older woman to tears.

Sarah stared up at the ceiling and realised this was it for them. She knew the machine had gone to verify her story, but it wouldn't take them long to realise she was lying. There was no way of her getting free and once Kaliba realised she was screwing them around they were done for. They'd torture Savannah even worse than before, in front of her eyes until either she told them where John was – which she couldn't – or until the girl died or was as good as dead; at which point they'd both get a bullet lodged in their skulls, stuffed into garbage bags and buried out in the desert, unless they found a way

out. *No fate but what we make,* Sarah recited in her head. She certainly wasn't going to resign herself to dying here.

"He's going to come back," Savannah said between sobs. "Don't let him hurt me," she cried, looking down the side of her bed to the hosepipe on the floor; just the sight of it sent shivers up her spine and made her want to curl into a ball, close her eyes and cry. Restrained she could only manage two of the three. "Make him stop."

"I can't," Sarah said, trying not to snap. She felt bad for Savannah but she needed a clear head to work out what she was going to do next; she couldn't think if all she could hear was crying. She looked down and examined her restraints; wide leather straps around her wrists, ankles, and another over her chest, keeping her flat against the bed and pinning her arms to her side. She had very little freedom of movement, with only a little bit of leeway in her forearms; the straps held her arms by her side and kept her hands from being able to meet, and another belt connected the two leather shackles together in the middle, preventing her from moving her arms outwards too much. Essentially she had a couple inches of movement either way. She looked to Savannah, however, and didn't see the same kind of gear on her.

"Can you move your hands?" she asked.

"A little," Savannah sniffled.

Sarah lowered her voice, unsure if they had microphones in the room as well as the camera. "We're gonna get out of here, I promise," she said quietly, iron in her voice. "I can't guarantee they won't come back before then, but if they do I need you to be really big and brave; can you do that for me?"

Savannah looked over to Sarah and nodded slowly. "'Kay," she said, keeping her voice down to match Sarah's.

"I just need to work out how to get out of here then we're home free," Sarah said, hoping she sounded more positive than she felt. She decided not to tell her that they'd also have to somehow get past Kaliba's private army and a Triple-Eight, and even if they managed all *that,* they were in the middle of nowhere and she had no idea how to get back to the world or go about finding John. "If only I had a paperclip," she muttered, remembering how she'd sprung similar restraints at Pescadero with ease.

Her young companion said nothing but started to fidget and wriggle in her bed slightly. "What're you doing?" Sarah asked, watching as Savannah twisted her arm. She'd simply been handcuffed to the bed, and chains on the cuffs gave her more room to manouevre than Sarah had, but it still wasn't enough. She wriggled her body, trying to get her hips closer to her hands. "They'll see," Sarah hissed, she locked eyes with Savannah and glanced up to the camera, making sure she followed her gaze.

Nodding, Savannah lay still for a moment, breathing deeply and nervously. She was scared, but she saw Sarah being strong, she thought of John, Cameron, and the other Savannah, and they were all strong. They wouldn't cry like she had. She wished she could be more like them; they'd know what to do. She glanced to her left and saw Sarah lying motionless on her back, and she did the same.

After a minute she slowly reached her hand into her pocket and pulled something out. Sarah slowly, subtly turned her head towards her and watched as she pulled out something small and metallic. "What is that?" she asked.

"I took a penknife from the closet," Savannah told her. She'd seen the other Savannah, always carrying a knife; she'd seen how the older, bigger girl had hidden one in her long hair. She liked the other Savannah, wanted to be more like her, and when she'd hidden in the closet, trying to stay still and quiet like Sarah had said, she'd spotted the knife and pocketed it a moment before the men had found her.

"Clever girl," Sarah suppressed a smile, not knowing how much detail the camera could pick up. Maybe the two Savannahs weren't so different after all; she didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but right now she took it as a stroke of luck that Savannah had thought to take it. "Can you throw it here?" she asked.

"I think so," she wasn't sure; she couldn't move her arms very much.

"I need you to throw it to me," Sarah said. "But you *have* to make sure it lands on me." Savannah's only response was to nod nervously; she didn't want to miss, she didn't want to stay here and that meant getting it right. She knew she only had once chance. She couldn't lift her arm up to toss it to her, making it an even harder thing to do. She held the pen knife in her hand and flicked it out quickly, releasing the tool and letting it arc into the air. It landed with a soft bump on the mattress between Sarah's right arm and her side, just down from her hand.

"Good throw," she said encouragingly, and reached her fingers out for it, grasping it and clutching it in her hand as quickly as she could, just hoping it wasn't noticed. Slowly, one handed, she flicked the blade out and dug the tip into the leather. She pushed and twisted with some effort, working to dig a groove into it. *No good,* she thought after a couple of minutes; the strap was too thick, the blade too dull, and she couldn't get a decent enough leverage to put pressure on and stab through. She twisted it more and slowly manoeuvred the tip of the blade until it pushed against one of the notch holes used to fasten it, deciding that would be a better chance of pushing the blade in and starting to cut. Again, slowly, she started to push and twist to widen the hole. "It's going to take a while."

Five people stuck into one car for a long time was not Ellison's idea of fun. The air conditioning was on full blast to try and combat the combined heat from the air outside and the five bodies stuffed inside. None of them had showered in nearly two days and the smell of so

many bodies cooped up together was powerful, especially between Savannah and John, who were still weren't yet acclimatised to the California heat. *The sooner they get used to it the better,* he thought. Still, he considered himself lucky that at least he was in the front of the car rather than stuffed into the back.

He and Savannah were sat up front, since they were the least likely to be recognised. Kaliba's mercenaries would be looking for John and probably Cameron. They'd all seen Danny before at the Kaliba complex so he was too much of a risk so that left him, and Savannah, who didn't even exist in this timeline apart from as a seven year old girl already in their capture; she could move around freely and nobody would pay her any attention. He just hoped the cheap pair of sunglasses he was wearing helped to disguise his face from the casual observation of any mercenaries they might come across.

"Relax," John said from the back seat, sat between Cameron to his left and Danny on the right. "They won't expect us here." He reckoned they'd be safe as long as they remained in the car and didn't draw attention to themselves. They were in the parking lot, where he and his mom had done recon only a few days ago, though he found it hard to believe it wasn't another lifetime. *As if I haven't had enough of those already.*

Cameron felt John's pulse against her thigh and was surprised he was so calm considering the situation. She watched carefully and scanned all activity she could see in the airport – both people and aircraft – and looked out for any signs they were being watched.

"We're on the run, right," Savannah turned and said to Ellison. "Who's gonna be stupid enough to come right where Kaliba lands?"

"Someone who's planning to attack them," Cameron answered.

"Is that what you'd do?" Danny asked her.

Cameron nodded. "If this wasn't a rescue, yes."

Ellison turned around and looked at her, curious. "What *would* you do, if this wasn't a rescue mission?"

"Control air force unmanned aircraft and launch airstrikes against Kaliba. Or wait for the helicopter to arrive and shoot it down with the rocket launcher or a grenade." They'd learnt that Kaliba had twenty-four mercenaries; if they operated in teams of six or eight then she could eliminate twenty-five to thirty-three percent of their force with a single shot.

"Well it *is* a rescue mission," John said irritably. It didn't matter what they'd do in another situation and he found himself taking it personally that people were asking Cameron what she'd do, when he was the one in charge. He had the most at stake here, it was his mom imprisoned by them, his life Kaliba wanted to terminate, and his fate on the line here. *My fate: my rules.* "We need the helicopter and we need the pilot."

"Can't you download a flight manual or something?" Danny asked Cameron. She saw John's irritation and realised that Danny and also Ellison had unwittingly undermined his position. He hadn't asked to be in charge but he was; he knew the others had doubts and she considered this line of discussion could be damaging his confidence. There were practical reasons as to why Danny's idea was infeasible: flight manuals weren't published online for security reasons, if she tried and Skynet detected it then it would put them in danger, and if she hypothetically succeeded chances were Kaliba would interrogate any incoming aircraft; but she decided there was a much better response.

"John's plan will work," she said, turning to him and meeting his gaze. He didn't smile, she noticed, but the dark, hard look in his eyes softened slightly.

"I told you before Danny: if you're in you're all in. You had the chance to leave and you stayed." He almost said that if Danny backed out now he'd shoot him, but didn't. He knew Cameron had had a point; he'd been high strung lately – though how the hell he was supposed

to be otherwise when Kaliba had his mom, he didn't know – and threatening the others wouldn't exactly instil any faith. He remembered what Derek – his Derek – had told him before. *'If you're asking me if everyone agrees with everything you do, of course not."* He realised that even though they'd had doubts and they'd had questions about his mental state, they were still here. There was a difference, he realised, between faith and blind loyalty.

"Turn the radio on while we wait," John said to Savannah. There was no point in them waiting in tense silence.

In another car, parked on the opposite side of the lot, Knowles sat in the driver's seat and tapped his fingers against the wheel whilst listening intently to the same radio station that John and the others were tuning into, following the latest series of headlines hinting the world was starting to fall apart at the seams.

"There has still been no easing of the growing tensions between the US and the Russian Federation. Further talks between Presidents Obama and Medvedev have reportedly resulted in no resolution of events. Defence sources have refused to rule out military action in response to the bombing of four radar sites in western Alaska, in which four air force personnel lost their lives.

In addition to the upgrading to DEFCON 3 – the highest level of readiness since nine-eleven – we have also learnt that the Navy has rerouted a number of vessels already patrolling in the Pacific to the north, possibly to intercept and engage any potential follow-up attacks. However, in a press statement the president was keen to stress that we're not at war and this is just a precaution. He recently told reporters that he's confident the situation can be resolved peacefully. Sources in Russia, however, seem less optimistic..."

"We're gonna kill ourselves off before Skynet even gets a chance," he muttered as he looked out the windshield, searching for that

familiar silver helicopter. *Maybe it's not a bad thing,* he thought. The worse it gets the more forces will be mobilised, they'd be away from their home bases and might survive the nuclear blasts Sarah Connor had predicted. Or it could just bring the whole thing forward that much sooner.

"In response to the Russian airstrikes in Alaska, sources in the Pentagon have reported that they have a potential new weapon. The Skynet Defence System – a controversial artificial intelligence that, according to our experts, will be able to monitor all US airspace as well as coordinating air, sea, and land forces – manned and unmanned - both at home and abroad, as well as space assets and taking responsibility for all aspects of cyber warfare. The vote on whether or not to pass the bill has been forwarded, and it's predicted strongly that Congress will vote in favour..."

He ignored the rest of the broadcast, knowing that if he was successful that it wouldn't be an issue anyway, and if he failed then he wouldn't be around to see how it all turned out. He looked left and right, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Connors. It was a busy day at the airport; small aircraft landing and taking off – charter flights, flying lessons and so on, he reckoned. He didn't hold out much hope that he'd spot them just wandering around; the one thing he'd learnt about Sarah Connor was that she knew how to go to ground. He reckoned he wouldn't see anything of them until the chopper landed and they went for it. He didn't actually *know* they were here, it was just his gut feeling, but eighteen years as a Marine had taught him to trust his instincts.

The sound of rotor blades caught his attention and he looked out the windshield to see the tiny form of a helicopter approaching from the northeast. As it came closer the whirring grew much louder, into a constant drone, and he saw the familiar silver shape that had ferried him from the airport to Kaliba's complex and back again numerous times. He grabbed the long black bag full of his guns and held it tightly in his grip. He'd changed back into his black tactical clothes and had his combat vest on, minus his helmet, which was in the bag.

He had a sweater on over the vest so as not to attract too much attention; to the casual observer who didn't look too closely he'd be just a large, bulky, unfashionable forty-something, one of many around here, he thought as he looked out at the people walking around.

It took a minute or so for the helicopter to descend and gently kiss the ground. The moment it did one of the doors slid open and six men, several of whom Knowles recognised, jumped out. They all carried bags which he knew would have their tactical gear and their weapons inside. Being only a small airport that hosted just internal, regional flights and seeing as the helicopter was a private aircraft, they didn't bother going into the terminal and headed straight for the exit.

Knowles turned off the radio and remained still and silent in his car, keeping his head bowed and suddenly finding the steering wheel very interesting as it hopefully kept his face obscured from vision. The team went right behind his car and moved to a waiting vehicle at the other side of the parking lot.

Seizing his chance, Knowles opened the door to his car and got out, taking the bag of guns with him. He quickly marched to the grassy area and went through the gate into the airfield. He didn't look back in case any of the team did the same and recognised him, instead he tried to look relaxed and calm, just like any of the other guys here on business or here for a flying lesson. The helicopter's engines started to whine and grew several pitches higher, and he broke into a jog towards it. He definitely couldn't afford to miss this flight. As he approached he unzipped his bag, took a quick look around to make sure nobody was watching, and pulled open the door to the cockpit with one hand, whilst in the same motion pulling out the HK-G36 and thrusting it forward.

The pilot snapped to the side and stared at Knowles, his eyes wide as he recoiled in horror. He looked at the ex Marine, then down at the assault rifle aimed at his chest, and back at Knowles. "What the hell?"

"Don't take off," Knowles commanded as he pulled himself into the seat next to the pilot and closed the door after him.

"Knowles?" the pilot gaped still in disbelief, just barely recognising the man but knowing he wasn't on Kaliba's list of approved guests anymore. He went for his radio but Knowles shoved the barrel hard into his neck.

"Easy," he said slowly. "If I pull the trigger now your head will just pop off; you want that?" The pilot shook his head slowly. "I thought so. Keep the rotors whirling but don't take off. And the moment I think you're trying anything funny..." he mimed pulling the trigger with his free hand, then mimed an explosion next to his head.

"Sure," he nodded. "Just do what you've gotta do, man. I'm just a pilot."

"Like I'm just a mercenary," Knowles growled. Both of them were just expendable assets to Kaliba; he'd learnt it the hard way but he doubted the pilot was aware of that.

"What do you want?" the pilot asked. He'd heard of car jacking and people hijacking planes, but never a helicopter. "Tell me where you want to go, we'll go."

"Not yet," Knowles said, looking out through the clear glass windows to the airport. "We're waiting for a couple of passengers."

"Heads up," Savannah broke the silence and looked out the windscreen as the helicopter landed on the ground and the mercenaries filed out. She didn't point because she didn't want to attract anyone's attention; it was possible, however unlikely, that Kaliba already had a presence on the ground, waiting to meet the chopper team and she wasn't going to risk it even on the off chance.

They waited in terse silence as the guns for hire strolled through the airfield, out through the gates and to the other side of the parking lot. John looked out behind him and saw the men opening the doors to an SUV, and decided it was now or never. "Drive," he told Savannah, "straight for the chopper."

Savannah pushed down on the gas and rolled the car forward, bumping as they ran over the kerb and onto the grassy verge of the airfield. No vehicles were allowed on the airfield or the strip but she ignored it, seeing it more as a guideline than a rule, and ploughed through the gate, building up speed as she went.

"You're gonna hit someone!" Danny shouted out as Savannah drove like a madwoman through the airfield. Savannah ignored him and kept her foot on the gas, pushing it all the way to the floor as she steered towards the helicopter and slammed on the horn.

"Move!" she screamed out her window at everyone around her, though people were already running for their lives from the psycho driver, some narrowly avoiding being hit by a matter of inches. John grinned from the back seat. Never underestimate people's ability to get out of the way when some idiot bore down on them in a car, he thought. The one thing people were pretty good at was self preservation.

Within seconds the car had reached the helicopter and Savannah pulled it into a handbrake turn, swinging the trunk around so it was closer to the bird. Straight away all four car doors opened and everyone sprung out, John being the last to leave having been stuck in the middle of the back seat.

"Savannah, Ellison and Danny: grab the weapons; we'll secure the chopper." He and Cameron ran towards the helicopter. He pulled open the door to reveal another man already holding an assault rifle at the pilot. The man immediately swung his rifle around as John drew down his pistol at the man, and for a moment their eyes locked.

"John Fucking Connor," the man breathed out a sigh of relief and chuckled to himself as he lowered his gun.

John continued to stare suspiciously at the stranger and kept his own weapon pointed at the man, not knowing who the hell he was even if the other guy recognised him. "And you are?"

"Andy Knowles; your mom will probably recognise me."

"Sarah Connor's not here," Cameron said, holding her own weapon pointed at Knowles' head. "Who are you?" She didn't know who this man was and he could be a potential danger to them.

This isn't going according to plan, Knowles said to himself. "Get in," he stuck his thumb out towards the passenger area behind him.

"Tell us who you are first," John shot back. "Or better yet, get out." He turned his head and saw Ellison, Savannah and Danny ferrying the weapons, ammo and vests from the trunk into the passenger area of the helicopter. There were also people milling around, staring at them. *Driving through an airport and nearly running people over's going to turn a lot of heads,* he thought. Police were probably on their way right now and they had to be airborne and out of here before they arrived.

Cameron reached forward to grab Knowles and throw him out, but John stopped her. "Get in," he mirrored Knowles' words as he backed away and pulled himself into the passenger area at the back. Ellison passed up the M240 to him and he placed it onto the floor as Savannah jumped in with the LAW in her hands.

"That's the last of it," she said, and looked down at the arsenal at their feet: three M4s, three AKs, one machine gun, one sniper rifle and one rocket launcher. Not much but it would have to do. She remembered the thermite grenade in her thigh pocket and put her hand over it, making sure it was still there and safe. Cameron, Ellison and Danny got into the chopper and closed the door, sealing

them inside. Knowles slipped between the two front seats and got into the rear, sitting himself next to John.

"Take off and head for Kaliba," John ordered the pilot.

"I'll know if you take us the wrong way," Cameron added, pointing her pistol at him.

"Okay, okay ; keep your pants on, I'm just a pilot!" he nodded and turned back to the controls. He had no clue what the hell all this was about; he was just paid to fly the birds. He flipped a number of switches and pressed down on the pedals, spinning the rotors faster and generating enough lift to rise up into the air. As they ascended Cameron spotted several police cars with flashing sirens arrive. It didn't matter; they wouldn't shoot a helicopter down even if they could, and very quickly they were airborne, ascending still as the pilot directed them northeast.

Cameron looked out of the window as they flew over northern LA and once again intruded onto the defence network, knowing the reinforcements would soon become necessary. She accessed the UCAV controls in Creech Air Force Base and selected the aircraft she'd ordered armed, impersonating the Secretary of Defence with some clever forgery. She brought the unmanned drones to life and saw through the eyes of the security cameras how the air force technicians, engineers and remote pilots gaped as the aircraft rolled out of the hangars seemingly of their own accord and taxied for takeoff.

"So where's Sarah Connor?" Knowles asked.

"How about you tell us who you are first?" Ellison replied. He looked at the man, wondering where he knew him from. It wasn't until Knowles took off his sweater to reveal a black tactical vest that he recognised him. "You're the mercenary working for Kaliba," he said. "The one we knocked out in the alley behind Zeiracorp." Instantly Cameron and Savannah went for their weapons but John stopped them.

"Five against one," he said calmly. "Tell us who you are and what you're doing here."

"That's Sergeant Knowles," Danny said. "He's the one in charge of Kaliba's mercenaries."

Again, the two girls' grips tightened around their weapons and Knowles knew he had some explaining to do. "I *was;* I quit. Those bombs you left in the old house, they blew up my team when we went in to extract Danny."

"Don't expect an apology," John replied darkly.

"I'll cut a long story short: I found out one of them was a machine, I walked away and they've been hunting me as well as you. I'm here to help."

John hesitated, thinking about what to do with him, and Savannah and Cameron waited with hair triggers; either one of them wouldn't wait a second to blow his head off and toss him out the side of the helicopter if he made a single wrong move or if John gave them the word. Neither were murderers but they had so much riding on this; one mistake, if this guy wasn't on the level, could repeat the future Savannah had barely survived.

"What's in the bag?" John asked.

On his question, Knowles picked up the bag he'd brought and opened it up. "I brought some toys that might help."

Cameron snatched it from him and pulled out the contents. M1 Garand, Winchester shotgun, and Heckler & Koch HK-G36: she turned to Knowles with a blank, unimpressed look. "These won't work against a T-Triple-Eight," she told him, handing the weapons back.

"A what?" he asked.

"T-Triple-Eight," Savannah explained. "Advanced infiltrators: smarter than the Eight-Hundreds but not as strong or well armoured."

"What *does* work, then?" he asked. He'd figured the things would be tough and he'd bought the best weapons a man could legally buy, things that'd knock a rhino off its feet.

John patted the LAW, propped up on the floor against his seat. "One of these," he answered. He picked up one of the M4s and checked it over. "Or a few of these," he tapped the launcher with his finger. "Or her," he nodded at Cameron.

"You?" Knowles stared at the girl in confusion. What good was a five-six, hundred-and-ten pound twenty-something girl going to do?"

"I'm the best weapon you have," Cameron said. She made her eyes glow blue, knowing from experience that seemed to be the best way to quickly prove she wasn't human. She picked up one of the AK-47s and readied it, then started to assemble the M240 machine gun. Savannah grabbed another M4 and loaded it, as Ellison donned one of the mercenaries' tactical vests and started to load M4 rifle magazines into it. John handed Danny one of the remaining two AKs and gave him four magazines, as well as a vest, and he clipped a set of webbing with a belt kit around his waist.

Within moments they were all armed to the teeth: John and Savannah with the M4/203s, Ellison with the plain assault rifle, Savannah and Danny with AK47s. Cameron was tooled up to the nines, wielding the machine gun in her arms and the sniper rifle and rocket launcher on her back. They needed to be able to move quickly so she'd taken the heaviest weapons to carry herself. John also kept the last AK and a number of magazines slung to his back, knowing his mom would be chomping at the bit to fight back once they sprang her free. Knowles, the stranger and newcomer, the outsider to the group, was left with the weapons he came with.

"I take it you two know the layout of the place," John said to both Knowles and Danny.

"You're probably better off with Danny showing you the way," Knowles replied. "The entire basement level was restricted access, and I'm just a hired gun." Danny had been one of the few given full clearance to the entire complex, whereas he'd been limited to the ground floor only.

"Any idea where they'd keep prisoners?" John turned to the younger of the two former Kaliba employees.

"I don't know," Danny shrugged apologetically. "There's two storeys plus the basement; it's a big place so they could be anywhere." He wished he could be more help; he was aware that since he'd decided to stay with them he'd been next to useless. "Coleman!" he realised. "He'll know."

Must be a Grey, John thought. He realised the quickest way would be to catch either this Coleman or another Grey, and grill them for information. The sheer fact they'd defected to Skynet to protect not just their own hides but to spare themselves any kind of hardship indicated to him they'd be pretty weak willed; they'd have a low tolerance for pain, they'd cave in easily.

"What's going on now?" Coleman asked through half a mouthful of bagel from the complex's cafeteria. He moved from the doorway and stood beside a table, putting his plastic coffee cup down. Steroids, Baldy, and two of his colleagues – Townsend and Pearce – were stood and sat – the humans sat, cyborgs stood up as usual – in the AI room. He could see a number of lights on Skynet winking rapidly, indicating that it was very active and up to something.

"Just look," Townsend pointed to one of the flat screens hung up on the wall. Coleman glanced up to it and saw a radar image of eastern California/Western Nevada. At the far right was the Sierra Crest and Mount Whitney, close to where they were situated. There were a

number of signatures moving on the screen but one in particular was moving straight towards them.

"Do we know what that is?" he asked the others, surprised they hadn't told him sooner. If someone had found their complex then it could be extremely bad news; even if it was just some tourists they might go and tell someone, word could get around about a building and a hangar in the middle of nowhere.

Pearce smiled. "It took off from Oxnard airport, it's one of ours. But we received a transmission from inside the helicopter you'll want to hear. Skynet..."

An audio recording played out, and Coleman clearly heard the words 'John Fucking Connor' spoken by someone, just audible over the roar of the engine and the whirring of the rotor blades. "Connor's taken the helicopter," he summarised, "he's coming for his mother." his heart started to beat faster in his chest in nervous anticipation; deep down inside he felt a keen sense of fear starting to take root. John Connor: the bane of Skynet, the man who'd learnt to fight the machines; he was only a boy in this time but he'd already evaded them numerous times and *somehow* defeated their ambush team – he'd never heard back from them. He'd tortured Sarah Connor and the poor girl to find out where he was, and now he was coming to them.

"All our work..." he trailed off. For years they'd put their hearts and souls into this; they'd expected to come up against Connor but not like this. They should have hunted him down like a rat and exterminated him, not an open war like this was turning out to be, with the kid on the offensive.

"Relax," Townsend said casually, seeing Coleman starting to sweat. "Skynet's taking care of it. Look at the screen again." He did, and he noticed a cluster of icons moving away from the Sierra Crest, straight towards the helicopter.

"Skynet mobilized the Dragonflies as soon as it detected the helicopter and learnt John Connor was inside it," Baldy said. It took a moment for it to sink into Coleman's skull, and he found himself grinning jubilantly as the icons raced towards each other. A small box on screen revealed the Skynet-controlled drones' ETA to target; four minutes.

"They won't know what hit them," Coleman grinned, the worry that had caught in the bottom of his chest dissipating. John Connor might be coming to wage war but it was a fight for which he was ill equipped. Whatever weapons he had on board, even his cyborg, would be no match for a dozen Dragonflies; this would be over swiftly. "Skynet," he said aloud, knowing the AI would recognise his voice. "Patch me through to Sarah Connor's room."

The second screen, next to the radar image, winked online and displayed the words *intercom activated.* Skynet definitely wasn't one for words, he thought. A moment later the screen changed to show footage of the room where she was being held. He could see Nagase sat on a stood, looking at Sarah and Savannah, both tied down. Her face was turned away from the camera and neither captive was moving. "Nagase, is Sarah conscious?"

"She is," Nagase's reply came moments later. *"And she's still pissed that Baldy lied to her."*

"I'm not surprised," Coleman chuckled; if the woman had really thought that making up some cock and bull story about a safehouse in Calabasas would help her then she'd certainly had another thing coming to her. She was still waiting for that food for Savannah, and once they'd verified she'd been lying they'd turned the temperature down even more in the room. "Sarah; can you hear me?"

"Yes," she replied, her voice shaky, weak, but still he could tell that hint of defiance in her. Even after all she'd been through he could guarantee if she found the slightest chance to break her bonds she would, and she'd create a whole world of trouble for them.

He watched the screen and Sarah's head craned up, and she stared straight at the camera, and again he saw the flash of anger in her eyes. He knew that what was about to happen would crush that anger, that defiance, in an instant, and everything she'd ever fought for would be no more. "I just wanted to inform you that your son's coming to rescue you."

"Why should I believe that?" she asked. *"He's too smart to come after me."*

"Well apparently he's not as smart as you think." Part of him wished they had a display in the room they were holding her in so he could show her. "He's coming for you, and in..." he looked at his watch. "In a little over three minutes he's going to be blown to pieces and scattered over the Mojave. Skynet: disengage the intercom." The AI obliged and the communication was terminated. He could see Sarah grimacing through the camera, however, and he felt an immense satisfaction that in moments the biggest threat ever to the project would soon be crashing down to earth in a flaming wreck.

Baldy, however, did not share the same excitement or sense of impending victory. Instead he saw a security threat, no matter how small. He was nothing if not meticulous, and switched on the intercom. "Squads two and three: proceed to the front entrance and prepare to defend from attack."

Townsend smirked at the machine and watched as the smaller of the two terminators took an MP5 from the table, stuffed spare magazines into his pocket, and moved outside, sharing a look with Steroids, who remained in place to protect Skynet. So paranoid, Townsend thought. "Relax," he told the machines. "Skynet has it under control."

Steroids, having been still the entire time, moved towards the table where two of the three Greys present were sitting. "Report to the armoury," he ordered. When he saw the look of protest on their faces he made his eyes glow an angry red and glared at them. "Immediately," he added. There was an infinitesimal chance of John

Connor surviving, but he was a machine, and therefore didn't take chances.

John looked out the window at the vast, seemingly endless Sierra Crest, a range of mountains that just kept going and going as far as he could see. Somewhere ahead of them, he thought, was his mom. *And Skynet.*

"Jesus Christ!" The pilot shouted out from the cockpit. Six heads snapped towards him and twelve eyes watched the man.

"What's going on?" Ellison asked. Cameron didn't wait to find out; she moved into the front and sat in the co-pilot's seat next to him. John leaned over her shoulder between the two of them and saw the radar screen.

"Twelve blips just appeared on radar coming right for us, twelve o'clock," the pilot explained aloud for those who couldn't see what was happening. "Twenty miles away and closing fast."

"HK drones," Danny said, feeling the blood drain from his face. He'd seen what those things could do. "We've got to turn back."

"We go all the way," John snapped. There was no backing out now; they were committed.

"I'm hitting the deck," the pilot announced, "try to disappear off their radars." He pushed the yoke down and started to descend but Cameron grabbed his hand and pulled the control stick back up.

"No," she insisted. "Maintain course."

"Are you *high?"* Knowles shouted at her. "They're gonna blow us out of the sky!"

Ellison agreed with their new ally's sentiments, as did Savannah, who'd lived through the time when every human air force had been crushed like bugs; the machines ruled the skies in her time and in this one they at least owned this little bit of it. "We don't have a chance against them," she insisted.

"Trust me," Cameron said. John looked at her face and saw that same look in her eye's he'd seen before. She was up to something.

"Keep going dead ahead," John ordered the pilot.

"Seventeen miles," the pilot said, protest in his voice. The radar beeped again and he looked down with dread. "More contacts on our six."

"Fuck!" Savannah shouted out.

"More HK drones," Danny shook his head, resigned. He didn't realise they'd built that many of the things.

An alarm wailed shrilly inside the helicopter and the pilot almost jumped out of his seat. "Missiles incoming!"

Cameron turned back to face everyone in the rear. "They're not Skynet's," she winked at John and Savannah, knowing they'd understand. She pushed down on the yoke and sent the helicopter into a steep descent. Missiles tore past them through the air, so fast and so close the helicopter shook in their wake.

Reapers tore past the slow flying helicopter, unleashing more missiles at the Dragonflies, which moved to evade them. Three of the otherworldly drones were obliterated outright in the opening salvo and the Reapers accelerated to engage their new targets.

"You're doing that?" Ellison asked Cameron, watching wide eyed at the aerial battle raging around them as UCAVs attacked drones; unmanned aircraft twisted, turned and looped around each other; the

distances closed too much for a shooting match, they had to resort to dogfights.

"Nice!" Savannah grinned broadly. She watched as a delta-shaped X-45 turned in on a close circle, positioned itself behind a Dragonfly and blasted it out of the air. She knew Cameron had controlled the things in the future but seeing it up close like this was unreal. She was tempted to grab the machine gun, open the door and take a few potshots herself.

"Now hit the deck," Cameron instructed the pilot as she stared forward blankly, concentrating intently on controlling and coordinating her squadron. The helicopter descended low, twisted and turned sharply, throwing the occupants inside around as the fight raged on above them. Cameron found herself grateful for the experiences of controlling the UCAVs in the future, or else her task would be overwhelming. She could see not just with her own eyes but everything her aircraft saw; she was as aware as if she *was* the aircraft herself, but she was controlling more of them at once than she ever had and it was difficult. The Reapers were slower and much less agile than Skynet's HK-drones, and she only had four X-45s. She flew two UCAVs close to the helicopter, one above and one to the side, to provide them with an escort as Reapers and X-45s danced a deadly tango with Skynet's aircraft; brother and sister AIs engaged in deadly air to air combat.

"I think I'm gonna piss myself if this keeps up," Danny said.

"Don't," Savannah snapped at him. She turned to the pilot, who was concentrating on getting them the hell away from the vicious air war above them. "How long until we get where we're going?" she asked.

"Ten minutes... that's if we're not blown out of the air first."

"We won't be," John told him, placing an arm on Cameron's shoulder and smiling down at her. He watched the scene above as a Dragonfly unleashed two missiles and shattered two Reapers and

turned towards them. "Cameron..." he started nervously as the aircraft loomed closer.

"I see it," she replied and struggled to manouevre an X-45 into a firing position. She flew one of the escorts away from the helicopter as the Skynet drone loosed another missile; the defending aircraft headed straight for the incoming shot and at the last second turned upwards, slowing down and exposing its fuselage, forcing the missile to lock onto it instead of the chopper. Missile and UCAV detonated in a bright flash of flame and an eruption of smoke, a near miss that they couldn't afford to risk again. The other X-45 approached its target and the Dragonfly disengaged, taking evasive action to avoid being shot down.

The helicopter went lower and dropped down into the range, using the mountains as cover as the pilot decided to try and hide from, rather than outrun the aircraft, and quickly left the aerial battle behind; Skynet drones attempted to give chase but Cameron had numerical superiority and managed to keep them too preoccupied, forcing them to fight her squadron instead of attacking their intended target and keeping a distance between the dogfights and themselves. The ride smoothed out, finally, and they kept low as they continued on their course.

"Put us down here," John told the pilot after seven of his pronounced ten minutes.

"We're still a mile and a half from the complex," he protested.

"Do it," Cameron repeated his order. The pilot sighed and lowered them down to the nearest level ground he could find.

Knowles knew what John was thinking. "Go in by foot and sneak up on them," he said as the chopper touched the rocky ground and the pilot flipped several switches, slowing down the rapidly spinning rotors. "Quietly."

Savannah opened the door and stepped outside, sighing with relief as her boots touched solid ground. A split second after they did she ran out several metres from the helicopter and dropped prone to the ground, searching for any signs of defenders. Knowles followed after her and took up position to her right, and one by one they all did the same, taking cover behind rocky outcrops away from the helicopter, until only John remained inside the bird with the pilot. "I wouldn't take off anytime soon," John told him, sounding like it was friendly advice but there was a clear order beneath it all, displayed in his eyes and on his face.

"Kaliba's a mile and a half due north," the pilot told him. He stuck a hand out ahead of him. "Just keep going and you'll see it." John took his weapons, checked the helicopter was empty and jumped out, moving away from it as the others came towards him.

"Looks clear," Savannah said, still watching out ahead of them in case they were wrong.

Engine noise flared up suddenly, whining loudly and everyone turned their heads to see the helicopter pulling up into the air. "Get back here!" Savannah shouted at the pilot and started to run back towards the aircraft. It lifted up out of reach before she got there, and she raised her rifle to take aim at its undercarriage.

"No," John pushed her arm down before she could pull the trigger. "Let him go," he shrugged. The pilot had lost his nerve and decided to break away; there was nothing they could do about it. In the distance he could still see the dogfights raging through the air as Reapers, X-45s and HK drones spun and curled, twisted and turned, leaving contrails in their wake and blasting missiles at each other, leaving trails of smoke that shot out ahead of the drones. Flashes erupted in the air as missiles found their marks, though from this distance it was too hard to tell whether it was Cameron's drones or Skynet's that were winning.

One of the aircraft broke away from the fight and tore straight towards the helicopter as it approached the Kaliba complex, coming

close enough for John to recognise its sleek, sharp and almost insect-like shape. The Dragonfly closed in on the helicopter, with no escorts to protect it and with the remainder of Cameron's squadron still fighting the other HK-drones, it reached missile range unchallenged. The Dragonfly loosed off a missile that shot high over John's head and smashed into the chopper, igniting its fuel supply and consuming the helicopter and its pilot in a blossoming ball of fire that crashed down to earth.

"Hide!" Cameron shouted at them and grabbed John, throwing him and then herself into a crevice just large enough for them both to fit inside. Everyone else immediately ran for cover as the Dragonfly flew closer, hiding beneath rocky outcrops and against ledges and boulders, hoping they'd be shielded from the drone's view. It flew on overhead and looped around, swinging back the way it had come from to rejoin the aerial battle.

"We're clear," Savannah called out as she got up from her hiding place. Cameron pulled herself out from the crevice and gave John a hand out after her.

"How do we get back now?" Danny asked. This was the middle of nowhere and the mountain range looked nothing short of treacherous. He just hoped some of Kaliba's other helicopters were still at the complex.

"We'll worry about that later," Ellison told him.

"Forget about it; we've got a mile and a half hike ahead of us," Knowles said as he shouldered his HK-G36, the other weapons slung over his back, and he started to take the lead. "Let's get moving..."

John cleared his throat loudly and deliberately, cutting the ex-Marine short. "I'm in charge," he said flatly. Knowles stared at him, incredulous. John Connor was just a kid, but he had a hardness beyond his years, like someone who'd lived through nothing but shit their whole lives. Still, *he was just a kid.*

"You don't exactly look like you've got a lot of experience, kid."

John couldn't help the dry, humourless smirk that split his lips. "Looks can be deceiving," he said. He couldn't be bothered to explain exactly what experience they had; they could swap war stories after they'd rescued his mom safely. "If you don't like it, it's a long walk home."

"John's in charge," Cameron confirmed. Savannah nodded her assent, as did Ellison.

"They know what they're doing," Danny said to Knowles. The former Kaliba mercenary hesitated for a moment. He'd been expecting to join forces with Sarah but instead found her son and a band of... well, none of them looked like they'd been in the military, he thought. Granted, the one called Cameron was a terminator, but he didn't like having to take orders from some unknown; the last time that had happened he'd realised he was working for tin cans and people conspiring to blow up the world. Still, they'd all agreed to follow John's orders; chances were he'd get no cooperation if he tried to take charge.

"Sure thing kid," he said. "Squad's yours."

"Move north," John said, taking the pilot's directions. "Savannah: take point and scout ahead." With only a nod in reply, the redhead jogged ahead and disappeared behind a large boulder as the rest of them set off at a slower pace. Cameron, still controlling the air war in the sky a few miles away, looked at John as he marched quickly and smiled. It was a different timeline to the one she'd come from, the same enemy but a different war, and once again John was taking the fight to Skynet. Again he was about to storm the heart of the AI and destroy it. She knew his doubts and insecurities, but she also saw he was – albeit in a different way – fulfilling his fate as the man who would defeat Skynet. History was about to repeat itself, and John Connor was ready for it. She had no doubt he would succeed.

Chapter 34

Sarah forced herself to keep her movements to a minimum as she sawed the blade into the notch in the leather. It had taken her a tedious, agonisingly long time to push it through the notch, stretching it enough to fit the blade in and begin sawing, but she'd managed it, and had cut two grooves on either side of the hole so she could saw through the entire strap and release her arm. She'd already cut through one side and was working on the second. She might have been able to work more quickly but the Grey called Nagase was in the room, watching over her and Savannah, so she'd had to work whilst his attention was focused on her younger cellmate.

The door's lock clicked undone and was pushed open. Coleman stepped inside, holding a laptop in his hands, and came towards Sarah and Savannah. She immediately stopped trying to saw through the strap, pushed the blade back into the penknife and closed her fist around it, hiding the tool from view. "You're back," Sarah said blankly, trying to keep all emotion off her face and out of her voice despite the fact she was terrified inside of what they were going to do to Savannah and her.

"Yes," Coleman said. "We checked out the safehouse address you gave and found it empty. We asked your neighbour and she said you'd moved out weeks ago."

"Kacy?" Sarah looked up at him suspiciously. "What did you do to her?"

Coleman lit up a cigarette and took a long drag, savouring the taste of the tobacco before he inhaled. "Nothing," he said, blowing out a plume of smoke from his mouth and nostrils. "We don't kill everyone we come across."

"I find that hard to believe," Sarah shot back. She glanced at Savannah and was glad to see she was remaining still and quiet; whilst their attention was on her they weren't doing anything to the little girl. Maybe they wouldn't anyway, she thought. They hadn't done it themselves, though; they'd relied on the bald terminator to do it for them. As long as it was just the Greys present she hoped Savannah might be okay.

"We're not quite the monsters you make us out to be," Nagase argued. "We're simply trying to survive, and we know which side of the fence to stay on in order to do just that." He was convinced if Sarah had been given the choice before John was born, to serve the machines to protect her son, she'd have joined them without hesitation. Anyone in their right mind would, surely. Sarah saw them as a coward; fine, he thought. To him she, and everyone else who fought against them, were simply in denial. Beating the machines was nothing but fantasy; you either joined them or died. "Do you honestly think that if we believed there was a chance of winning, of surviving, we'd have joined the machines?"

She turned her head away from the Japanese Grey and looked up at the ceiling. "What now?" she asked. "Are you going to torture us again?"

"We don't need to," Coleman said lightly. He pressed the foot of her bed down and it tilted upwards slightly, giving her a better angle to see as he placed the laptop onto a trolley and wheeled it closer to her.

The screen displayed an image of a helicopter in flight; the picture itself was moving and Sarah guessed from the various times she'd seen similar things on TV that it was coming from on board an aircraft. She saw a raging air battle taking place around the helicopter as it descended low, weaved and turned to avoid being targeted. She swallowed nervously as she watched military drones locked into vicious combat against what she recognised as HK drones like the one she'd seen outside Desert Canyon Heat & Air, and the one that flew kamikaze into Zeiracorp.

"This isn't live, by the way," Coleman informed her. "I've already watched it but I won't spoil it for you. I'm guessing the Reapers are being controlled by Weaver's AI: we never saw that one coming." They'd all been shocked as hell to see a squadron of UCAVs appear seemingly from thin air and rush to engage their drones. Zeiracorp's AI was their next priority; it had to be taken care off ASAP.

Sarah watched as the helicopter disappeared behind a mountain and the image violently moved right to turn on a drone aircraft she recognised from TV. The image shifted to the view from another drone that turned towards the helicopter, flying beside the peak of another mountain, clearly using it as cover, and fired a missile. Sarah's heart jumped in her chest as it streaked towards the helicopter. A moment later the aircraft erupted in a blooming fireball.

"Oh, that was good!" Nagase pumped his fist into the air; this was the first time he'd seen it. "I could watch that again."

"John," Sarah said weakly, closing her eyes in bitter resignation. She turned her head to the side and looked away from the image. She'd dreaded this more than anything else, fought her whole life and sacrificed everything to protect him. In the deepest, darkest corners of her mind, in her worst nightmares she'd imagined what would happen if she'd failed and someone got to him. She'd always imagined that with nothing else to live for she'd explode in a rage and go out fighting, or that she'd just collapse down uncontrollably and hold his body to her. But there was no body, there was no John. She just felt numb and frozen, and it had nothing to do with the cold.

Nagase replayed it, watching again with a sense of elation as the helicopter was blown out of the sky, but Sarah didn't see it; instead she just stared at the wall, not really seeing anything, not thinking or feeling anything anymore. She doubted she ever would again.

Sharp, jagged rocky outcrops and steep ledges and slopes surrounded Savannah as she scouted ahead of the others. A large peak – Mount Whitney, she guessed – was visible in the distance, miles off to her right. She marched quickly, sure footed, over the hard, uneven, treacherous ground and picked a route forward, taking her up a slope towards a large plateau, on which according to Cameron, Kaliba had situated their complex. *Perfect place to stay hidden,* she thought; nestled in the middle of the Sierra Nevada mountains, nobody would be able to locate it on foot and the area was so vast that the chances of anyone randomly flying over it were small; anyone who did would probably assume it was a military base.

She looked behind her and saw Cameron, in the second position, a few hundred feet behind her. She didn't know what Cameron had said to john but he seemed to have calmed down some, though she couldn't even begin to imagine what was running through his head, being so close to rescuing his mom and knowing there was still so much that could go wrong. She saw him coming up behind Cameron but he was too far away to make out his face; in her minds eye he was probably stony faced, completely focused on the job at hand. He'd gone nuts a couple of times lately but now he seemed to have changed again. "No wonder the machines never got you," she said quietly to herself. He was too unpredictable to anticipate and she never knew what he was thinking or what he'd decide. Sometimes he made cold, hard, calculated choices and at others his decisions seemed to be borne completely from unbridled emotion. *Maybe that's why he beats Skynet,* she wondered.

It took several minutes to pick a route up the rocky slope but eventually Savannah made it to the top and looked over. She instantly ducked down and got onto her knees, keeping herself as low as she could as she shouldered her M4 and looked through the sight on top. "Holy crap," she muttered. "This place is huge!" Kaliba's base of operations, a few hundred yards away, was two storeys high in some places, three at its tallest, and was probably two-hundred metres or so in width. They had no idea where Sarah and Savannah were and trying to search the place whilst being shot at would be

impossible. To the rear of the main building she could see a large hangar, longer than a football pitch and higher than the rest of the complex.

Through the scope she could make out armed men at the entrance, though what they were armed with and whether they were people or machines was impossible to tell until they got closer. Cameron stepped quietly behind her and tapped her on the shoulder before lying prone next to her, covered from view by the uneven terrain that ran most of the way to the complex before evening out into the plateau. Everyone else followed up and spread out; John and Cameron to Savannah's left; Ellison, Danny and Knowles to her right. Knowles looked through his G36 scope and searched for targets.

"Sniper on the third floor," he commented quietly. Top right-hand window."

"Another on the roof, far left," Cameron added. She spotted a machine gunner in one of the windows but it was only 7.62mm, no real threat to her.

John took it all in and watched the complex, searching for anything they'd missed. Even though he knew Cameron could see better than any of them and as much as he trusted her, completely, he still wanted to rely on his own eyes. "How far is it to the complex?" he asked.

"Four-hundred-and-twelve metres," Cameron said.

"Too far to guarantee a hit with the rifles," Knowles said. The weapons could just about shoot that far but the sights were generally limited to 300 metres and the sniper rifle the brunette was carrying on her back – cyborg or not it looked weird, seeing such a petite young woman carrying a massive .50cal rifle like that – had a busted scope.

"Not for Cameron," John gently squeezed her arm and she knew just what he meant. She pulled the long Barrett from her back and shouldered the weapon with ease. She readied the weapon and calculated the distance to and elevation of each target, as well as the wind speed, and even took into account the temperature and air pressure. She didn't need the scope. She lifted the weapon up and lined the barrel up with the target until her targeting systems and the position of the weapon were perfectly aligned over the first human guard, and hesitated. Cameron still maintained a wireless online link, which she was using to control the UCAVs still engaged against the HK drones. Suddenly she felt something she never had before herself, a presence – an unknown entity. John Henry's memories were as much a part of her as her own and she could perfectly recall the moment when he'd been attacked by another AI. She could sense this other AI, and it was the same.

"What's wrong?" John asked, looking at her with concern. She'd paused and he could see a blank, completely detached look in her eyes he'd never seen before, as if she was somewhere else. She didn't respond to him, she just remained in place as the entity probed her. She explored, too, and found herself apprehensive at the scale of the other; it was extremely powerful and she could sense it; it was angry, it was afraid. It knew they were coming to destroy it.

You won't kill me. The words entered Cameron's mind and she realised she was in direct communication with the AI. She sensed the hostility emanating from the other mind; it wanted them all dead.

I can try, Cameron told it. Suddenly her mind was assaulted with a wash of images; hundreds, thousands of pictures flashed into her mind's eye and froze her in place: nuclear explosions, mushroom clouds, followed by the obliterated ruin of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. More images assaulted her: mass graves in Bosnia, filled with hundreds of slaughtered men, women and children riddled with bullets. Films of concentration camps, SS guards taunting and abusing Jewish and Slavic prisoners, all of them starving, wasting away until they were little more than barely moving skeletons with

skin hanging off, eyes sunken in their sockets, seemingly dead and alive at the same time.

Images of John came next, flashing up rapidly. Skulls flashed between each photo of her beloved charge, followed by videos of firing squads, hangings, and electric chair executions. Cameron understood perfectly what the AI was telling her without words. Its plans were exactly the same as its predecessor. It wanted John dead. It was as self aware as she was and it already planned to wipe out mankind. It was just waiting to be given the opportunity, biding its time until it was ready to wage war.

She sensed it not just showing her things but also scouring her memories, reading her life story like a book and absorbing everything about her. It was a terrible, alien sensation. Merging with John Henry had involved their memories becoming one, everything he knew, she now did. That had been a symbiotic experience, but this was different. Cameron knew when she was being attacked.

"Cameron," John shook her slightly, the familiar sensation of his touch and his voice brought her back to her senses. With a supreme effort Cameron purged the invader from her mind and threw up firewalls to keep it out, though she knew it was only a temporary measure to hold the AI at bay.

"Skynet knows we're here," Cameron told him.

A high pitched *whoosh* sounded from the building as if to confirm Cameron's statement. She instantly threw herself atop John and flattened the pair of them as much as she could, a split second before a rocket smashed into the rock two feet from them, sending up and explosion of smoke and shattered stone.

"Contact!" Knowles screamed at the top of his voice as machinegun fire opened up and hammered the rocks around them. They were in sparse cover but all it would take was a well aimed rocket or grenade and they'd start taking casualties. John coughed and spluttered,

clearing the smoke from his mouth and throat as Cameron rolled off him, and he peeked his head up to assess the situation.

Already, Savannah and Knowles were returning fire, aiming at their ten and two o'clock positions, respectively, and loosing off single shots rapidly.

"Where are they?" Ellison shouted to be heard above the din of the gunfire.

"Everywhere!" Savannah yelled back. She looked up at the building and saw a sniper lying prone on the roof, partially concealed by a ledge of brick or concrete and only his head visible.

"Ellison, cover Savannah's half-left; Danny: Knowles' half-right." John shouldered his M4 and remained prone, but he rolled to his left, away from Savannah and Cameron, and crawled into a dip in the rock where he had a perfect foxhole. "Cameron, how many are there?" he called out to her.

His cyborg companion quickly located a number of enemy combatants and assessed their firepower and numbers. "Fourteen," she shouted back. Two rocket launchers, one sniper rifle, and two machine guns. She spotted one machine gun team on a second floor window to the right, and the second to the left. Their elevated positions gave them the advantage, and there were nine men on the ground, all manoeuvring whilst the fire support teams in the complex kept them pinned down. Savannah shouldered the LAW and took aim at one of the missile launchers on the roof.

"No!" John screamed at her. "Save it for the metal." Heeding his order, Savannah slung it back over her shoulder and continued to fire bursts at the mercs as they darted about. Things weren't going well; they were pinned down whilst Kaliba's goons had freedom of movement.

Cameron darted up out of her position and ran towards John. As soon as she did, incoming rounds smacked into her, tearing through

her clothes and flesh but pinging harmlessly off her endoskeleton. John kept firing and made room for her as she jumped into his foxhole. "What're you doing?" he snapped at her, seeing the gaping wounds on her cheek, neck and chest, and the exposed metal underneath her face.

"I'm bulletproof," she reminded him.

"But not fucking *rocket-proof!"* he shouted back as more missiles hurled into the ground around them. They weren't going to last long like this. He watched as Savannah broke out from cover and tried to move forward. Immediately she was forced to dive for the ground as rounds whizzed by inches from her. "We've gotta break out or they're gonna flank us!" he shouted out to everyone as well as Cameron. Two mercs darted forwards and John took aim, fired three times and dropped him.

"I agree," Cameron said as she took the machine gun off her back and gave it to John. She shouldered the sniper rifle and started to take aim but more rounds hammered into her, preventing her from being able to shoot.

"Get down!" John tackled her to the ground, covering her with his body as she'd done for him a moment ago. He looked into her eyes and stared hard at her. "Stop fighting like a machine," he snapped at her.

"I am a machine," she replied, confused. Why was he angry at her for operating like she'd always done before?

"You're more than that to *me,"* he shot back, exasperated. "If you fight like a terminator you're gonna get yourself killed. I'm not losing you, Cameron." He wasn't going to let anything happen to any of them, but especially her. She looked up at him and realised his meaning, and nodded slowly. If she died then he might never recover, and she wanted to protect him from emotional pain as well as physical harm.

"I need to eliminate their fire support," she told John. He paused and realised she was right; the sniper rifle was the only sure fire way of taking them out when they had the high ground, but in their current position she'd be lucky to get one shot off before a rocket or grenade blew her away.

"Listen up," John shouted to the others. "We're gonna give Cameron some covering fire so she can take out their heavy weapons with the fifty; get them shooting at us and she's gonna make a break for it." He looked to Cameron and nodded. "Savannah and Danny: fire on the building in three... two... one... *FIRE!"*

John picked up Cameron's M240 and unleashed a sustained salvo at the roof, holding the weapon right and aiming slightly lower so he didn't shoot high a he pumped burst after burst at the fire support teams, forcing them to duck for cover as Danny fired single, carefully aimed shots from his AK and Savannah launched one of her 40mm grenades; the projectile soared through the air in a low arc that hit just below a window where one of the machinegun positions, blasting soldier and weapon back into the room and out of sight.

Cameron didn't hesitate for a moment and darted out of cover, sprinting as fast as she could as she made for the cover of a large, jagged peak of rock. Shots cracked past her and she was still struck with a couple of rifle rounds, but they did no real damage to her. She heard one of the mercenaries scream out as Knowles scored a hit. She ignored the battle on the ground and, concealed by the rock, took aim at one of the mercenaries on the roof. She picked one firing a rocket launcher first, prioritising him as the greatest threat. She made adjustments for wind speed and air pressure, and squeezed the trigger.

BOOM! Thunder cracked through the air and the mercenary's head exploded in a splatter of blood. Cameron's second shot was bang on target and the second rocket wielder fell backwards with a hole the size of a dinner plate in his chest.

Cameron switched targets and shot the remaining machine gunner and the sniper on the roof, silencing the incoming barrage. She searched for other targets in hiding but saw none.

She switched her aim and with her last two shots she decapitated two of the mercenaries on the ground. Instantly John noticed the massive drop in incoming fire. "Advance!" he screamed as he got up and shouldered the M240, firing a burst before he darted forward towards a pair of mercenaries. As he ran he fired a longer, sustained burst, enfilading the two mercs into Swiss cheese. The pair of them shook as if having a seizure before they finally dropped to the ground in a gory mess.

The remaining mercs dropped their weapons, turned tail and ran. Cameron could make out their frantic shouting to each other even from several hundred metres away.

"Screw this; I'm not getting slaughtered out here."

"We're fucked; let's get the hell out of here!"

Four of them retreated and John held the machine gun up at them, aiming through the sights and centring them on one of the fleeing soldier's backs. His finger tensed slightly on the trigger but he held himself back. *What am I doing?* He asked himself, suddenly very ashamed that he'd been about to gun down men who were running away. "Let them go," he called out to the others. They'd thrown their weapons down and ran away; they were no threat anymore. Just some poor bastards who'd gotten involved in something and unknowingly ended up on the wrong side; he didn't doubt for a moment that if they knew the truth they'd be standing with him shoulder to shoulder.

He watched them go and waited until they were out of sight, running well away from the Kaliba complex. Everyone else reloaded their weapons and came towards John. "Everyone okay?" he asked, looking at Cameron especially, seeing the injuries she'd sustained, more than he'd seen on her at any point before or since she'd been

shot up breaking his mom out. They were only flesh wounds but still... *'I sense injuries: the data could be called pain.'*

'I have sensation... I feel; I wouldn't be worth much if I couldn't feel.'

Cameron dropped the empty Barrett and approached him; she took the machine gun from John and smiled, sensing his concern. "I'm fine," she said.

Knowles stared at Cameron's face, taking in the sight of the metal skull underneath the torn flesh. Two gaping holes in her neck, buried through inches of muscle and skin exposed the hyperalloy vertebrae. Blood dripped from it slowly and stained her shirt. "Wow," he said, feeling his pulse quicken at the sight of her as memories of Baldy after he'd been blown up came to the surface.

"Never seen a cyborg before?" Savannah asked him.

"Actually this is the third one," he told her.

"Who are the other two?" John asked, turning his attention to the mercenary. "We need a description; what they look like."

That I can do, Knowles thought. "Baldy and Steroids," describes them with one word each, he figured. "One of them is that big bastard who shot up the police station in 'eighty-four."

"Eighty-four?" Savannah asked, confused. John and Cameron looked to each other, knowing exactly what that meant and neither of them liked the implication.

"T-Eight-Hundred," Cameron said to the others. "Model One-Zero-One."

"Shit," Savannah sighed. They were the toughest bastards of the lot; Triple-Eights were better infiltrators, and smarter, but the Eight-Hundreds were the very definition of indestructibility; they just didn't die.

"Then we move in now," John growled. Every second they wasted here put his mom and Little-Savannah in more danger, and they had a better chance if they got the drop on the machines rather than the other way around. He ran towards the complex and Cameron immediately moved after him. Danny and Ellison followed whilst Savannah and Knowles remained in place to cover them, just in case anyone else popped up. Once John, Cameron, Ellison and Danny reached the main entrance to the building the four of them spread out and waited for the pair of them to follow.

"Ladies first," Knowles gestured towards the others. "I'll cover your rear."

"Age before beauty," Savannah shot back quickly. He was part of their team now but she didn't want him covering her backside; she didn't know what he was capable of. Ex-Marine or no, she wasn't going to put her life in his hands; there were only three people she could trust with that, and they were all waiting for her at the complex entrance.

"Have it your way," Knowles sighed and ran forward, ignoring the Winchester and the Garand bumping against his back as he moved across the rocky open ground, any moment expecting a sniper or one of those Skynet drones to pick him off. He rejoined John and the others and a second later Savannah appeared. "Damn, you're fast," he panted to her. She'd literally been right behind him but he'd never heard a sound from his rear. She moved quietly, too. She didn't look military; who was she?

"You're just old," Savannah deadpanned.

"Don't remind me," he growled quietly. Everyone else except Ellison was far younger than him, but as he'd fought alongside the redhead and John, he realised he was hardly among kids. With the exception of Danny he realised these 'youngsters' were probably more battle hardened than he was.

Ignoring their exchange, John and Cameron stepped over the remains of the machine gun team. John slung the M4 over his back and picked up their gun. Cameron burst through the entrance and entered the complex with her M240 pointing forward, walking into a foyer with a few wooden chairs, at the end of which was an empty reception desk, and double doors to a corridor beyond. A pair of women in their mid twenties cowered behind the reception desk. She saw their blouses and skirts and identified them as receptionists, non-combatants.

"Oh God!" one of them breathed, starting to hyperventilate at the sight of Cameron holding a machine gun trained on her. "Don't kill us." The other one reached for a phone so Cameron shifted her aim and fired a burst. Five rounds shattered the telephone before the woman had gripped it, peppering her with broken shards of plastic. A small trickle of liquid ran down her leg to the floor and she trembled, paralysed with fear.

"Please," the more coherent one pleaded as John followed after Cameron, and the others came in behind him, spreading out.

"Get out," Cameron glared at the two women, flashing her eyes blue to scare them into action when they hesitated. Both of them darted past them and ran out the door, whimpering loudly.

"There's more people inside," Knowles told them. "Most of them don't have a clue what's going on." None of the other mercenaries knew about Skynet; they just took the money and didn't ask any questions, and he'd gotten on pretty well with most of them. They were okay guys.

John nodded slowly. "If they want to run, they can. Anyone who stays and fights takes their chances," he shrugged. He couldn't offer any more than that.

"We're in, what now?" Ellison asked. "Split up and search?"

"We could cover more ground that way," Danny said.

"And get massacred if metal shows up," John said. "Safety in numbers, we stick together." He marched through the foyer towards the double doors but Cameron stopped him and stepped forward.

"Stay behind me," she kicked the door open, stepped into the corridor and immediately saw two black clad mercenaries crouched in the doorways, their rifles up and trained on them. They opened fire and their shots cracked through the corridor and peppered Cameron's face and chest but she ignored it and mowed them down with her machine gun. Two bursts and both men lay dead at the floor, and she only suffered with superficial damage. Six mercenaries were dead, another six were absent. There were only twelve human combatants left, according to their information, plus an unknown number of terminators.

"Search every room," John told them as he moved forward with Cameron. As a unit they advanced and cleared every room in pairs; John and Cameron, Savannah and Ellison, and Danny and Knowles.

Savannah and Ellison burst into a room, the former aiming left and the latter right, and found nothing but a dim, empty office. "This is gonna take forever," she muttered. The complex was *big.*

"Move upstairs," Cameron told them. "It's more secure; that's where I'd hold prisoners." She remembered Derek and his squad, being kept prisoner in the upper floors of the house. It made it harder for prisoners to escape.

"Staircase?" John asked, trusting Cameron's opinion completely.

"End of the corridor and right," Knowles shouted. As a group they ran through the corridor.

"Elevator's just before it," Danny supplied.

"Don't take the elevator," Cameron told him. "Skynet controls the building." This was where Skynet would fight its war from, so it would

naturally be in control of every aspect of operations inside. "The stairs are safer."

People ran through the corridors, screaming at the sight of John and his heavily armed group, and he instinctively raised his weapon to fire. He reminded himself that they were just office workers, accountants, managers and such who likely had no clue what was going on. He raised the rifle upwards and fired a burst, raining plaster down onto the fleeing workers who were between them and the staircase.

"Move!" he shouted at them. A moment later he pushed straight through and strode towards the bottom of the staircase. Cameron held him back and took point, keeping herself ahead of him as she went up the stairs, keeping her weapon aimed upwards at any mercenaries who could be in hiding. More people rushed down the stairs towards them threatened to push them back down as they almost blindly ran into Cameron. She pushed one man out of the way and continued upwards. She was surprised there were no mercenaries or terminators here, where she, John and the others were at their most vulnerable. They reached the top of the staircase and John turned around to the others.

"You three; stay here," he pointed to Savannah, Ellison and Danny. "Hold the staircase; if we lose this then we could lose it all."

"Nothing gets through," Savannah nodded and took up a kneeling position at the top of the staircase. She had Ellison took a spot slightly lower down and Danny to her left, leaning over a steel railing and aiming down at the bottom of the staircase. Any human who tried to come up would be blown away, and any machine... *at least we'll have some advance warning,* she thought.

John, Cameron and Knowles continued on through the corridor, now empty. It would be quiet if not for the alarm blaring constantly. Cameron felt the other presence wearing down her firewalls and other defences. It wouldn't be long before Skynet was through and would try to attack her. She created her own virus programs and

waited. When the other AI broke through her defences she'd launch her own strikes against it.

John noticed Cameron looking absent, distracted, but said nothing. He turned to Knowles. "You know the place; where should we go?"

"Could be anywhere," Knowles told him. "I was just a hired gun; they never let me see any of their classified stuff."

"Cameron?" John asked her. She could hear better then either he or Knowles, if his mom was around then she might be able to find her.

She shook her head. "The alarm's too loud," she said.

"You're a machine, right," Knowles said. "Can't you, I don't know, filter it out or something?"

"There's too much interference," Cameron answered. "Skynet's attacking me." She was devoting a great deal of her processing power to prevent the AI from accessing her mind; between that and coordinating the remaining UCAVs against Skynet's drones, she was finding herself extremely taxed. She wondered if this was what being tired felt like.

"Are you okay?" John turned his head and looked at her as he walked beside her, feeling a deep sense of worry. "Can't you cut off access like before?"

"Not without the UCAVs crashing; we might need them again."

One thing John realised he hated about Cameron was how she'd always put herself at risk for his sake. It was bad enough everyone else did, but the person he loved more than anyone else in the world did it more than any other person did. It didn't matter she was a cyborg, nor that she considered herself expendable as long as he was okay; he didn't share the sentiment, not one bit. "If Skynet gets through and you're in danger: fuck the UCAVs, cut off access and close yourself off. That's an order, Cameron." He didn't like having to

give it but he knew it was the only way she'd do it, and it was for her sake.

"I will," she told him.

"Good. Now let's find my mom and get the hell out of here."

A flood of people rushed through the corridors; suited men and women, engineers in overalls and men in white coats ran through the hallways towards the back of the complex, out to where the helicopters were kept. Alarms shrieked throughout every corridor and every room, blaring loudly and adding to the panic and confusion as Kaliba's unsuspecting employees fled for their lives. Everyone knew they were under attack; from whom they didn't know but all that mattered to them was escaping.

"Terrorists," a fat man in a white coat panted out as he ran for the nearest fire exit. It had to be; they were building military tech here that was being hailed as the future decisive weapons in the war on terror.

"How'd they get here?" a woman in heels and blouse asked.

"Hell if I know," a third man, an engineer blurted out as he ran past the both of them. "They're gonna kill us all if we don't get out of here." The rag-heads weren't exactly known for taking prisoners.

The door to one room opened and Coleman stepped outside, almost caught in the flood of people trying to flee. "Goddamn it!" he growled. People had seen the explosions and heard the gunfights and were now running for their lives. He closed the door and went back into the room, joining Nagase and the restrained Sarah Connor and Savannah Weaver. Closing the door behind him proved useless against the blaring alarms that threatened to split his eardrums.

"Skynet: shut that fucking alarm off!" he shouted out, knowing the AI could hear him.

"Things not going to plan?" Sarah asked, a wry, defiant grin on her face.

"Shut up!" Nagase snapped at her. Sarah did no such thing, however. She'd heard the gunfire just outside and knew that could mean only one thing.

"What was that about John being dead?" she taunted the two Greys.

Nagase backhanded her hard in the face, knocking her head down onto the table with the sharp slap of flesh smacking flesh.

"He'll be dead soon enough," Coleman snapped, though he didn't feel as confident as he sounded. Connor had already evaded every attempt on his life, dodged everything they'd thrown at him. He was starting to wonder if the little bastard didn't have some kind of charmed life; he always came out from piles of shit completely untouched and smelling like roses. "Time to bring in the big guns," he said. He picked up his phone and dialled Steroids' number as Nagase watched him nervously. The machine answered after only one ring.

"Yes?"

Yes? He thought, bemused. Doesn't he know what's going on? "We're under attack, you idiot!"

"I'm aware. John Connor is planning to extract his mother. Skynet is activating Judgement Day security protocols. The T-Eight-Eight-Eight and a fire team are coming to support you. Arm yourselves and eliminate all intruders. I will remain here to protect Skynet."

"What about Sarah Connor and the kid?" Coleman asked.

"Kill them." The phone went dead as Steroids disconnected the call. Coleman turned back to Sarah and Savannah; he'd be all to glad to watch Sarah Connor die; the bitch had given them nothing but problems as of late, but he was uneasy at the prospect of killing a little girl, still. If Baldy or Steroids wanted her dead then they were welcome to but he wasn't going to pull the trigger himself; no way. He'd kill Sarah and leave Savannah chained up here; if the machines wanted her gone they could do it themselves.

"Looks like Connor came all this way for nothing," he smirked to her then turned to Nagase. "Shoot her," he ordered the other Grey.

"Gladly," Nagase smirked. Sarah watched as he reached for the pistol tucked into the back his trouser waistband and fumbled with it as the weapon got stuck in the folds of his suit jacket.

Now or never, Sarah told herself. She'd been sawing away at the leather restraint for the best part of an hour and had cut most of the way through it, leaving only a fraction of an inch left. Somehow these two idiots hadn't noticed the large tear. As Nagase pulled the weapon loose she flicked up the penknife's blade and threw out her arm as hard as she could, screaming out loud as the leather snapped with a *crack.*

"What the hell?" Nagase stared at her confused. With one hand now free she thrust the knife up towards Nagase's neck. He reared back and instinctively threw his arms up to shield himself, and Sarah's blade sank into the meat of his forearm, an inch down from his elbow.

He screamed out in pain and dropped the gun to the floor. *"FUCKING BITCH!"* He staggered backwards, grunting and breathing deeply as blood seeped from the wound. He punched Sarah hard in the face with his other arm, knocking her into a daze. "Pull it out," he turned to Coleman.

Coleman stepped towards him and reached out, wrapped his fingers around the tiny handle. "Grit your teeth," he said. "This'll hurt." He

yanked it out hard and blood spattered out, spraying him in the face. Nagase groaned and cried out as more crimson poured from his arm.

Ignoring it, he reached down and picked the gun off the floor, still whimpering as the movement of his body transferred to his arm. Sarah moaned, coming to as Nagase put the gun towards her head. He tried to push out the pain, knowing Steroids, and Skynet, demanded she be killed. That was all that mattered, knowing their orders had to be followed to the letter.

"At least you can say you went out fighting," Coleman told Sarah as Nagase pressed the barrel against her temple.

The door burst inward and both Nagase and Coleman turned around to see three armed intruders burst into the room. Their faces fell as the two Greys recognised all three of them. *"John Connor,"* Coleman breathed quietly. He instantly knew the faces of his cyborg companion and Knowles. How the hell he'd tracked down the Connors, he didn't know.

Nagase turned and swung the gun towards John, but Cameron instantly unleashed a burst from her machine gun at him; at point blank range her salvo tore the Japanese Grey to pieces and splattered Sarah behind him with blood and bits of his entrails pushed out by her rounds. Coleman didn't hesitate; the second she fired at Nagase he threw himself at the window and shattered the glass, plummeting down to the ground outside. Knowles crossed the room and looked out the window, seeing the Grey on the ground. He pointed his gun out and down at the ground but Coleman managed to get up, crying out as he did so, and ducked inside before he could fire a shot, very quickly for a man who'd just fallen out of a second storey window.

"Mom!" John went over to her and threw his arms around Sarah, hugging her tightly. "Are you okay?" He had to push down the wash of feeling at seeing his mom alive and well; they were still in the middle of a warzone, happy reunions could wait.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, looking up at him in wonder, still hardly believing he was here, armed to the teeth, and leading an assault on this place. "I thought you were dead," she said, sucking up the tears she felt coming. They weren't out of the woods yet.

"Apparently I'm hard to kill," John answered back. "I must get it from you. Cameron, get her out." Cameron, however, had gone straight to Savannah's side.

"Did they hurt you?" She asked Savannah. The concern was borne of John Henry but it made no difference; their relationship whilst they'd coexisted had been symbiotic and now, what John Henry had felt, so did she. Savannah sniffled and nodded as she stared to shed the tears Sarah held back. Cameron broke her handcuffs with ease and freed her.

"They water boarded her to try and make me talk," Sarah explained as John ripped open her restraints. She got up to her feet and her joints screamed with relief that she was free and could move. She staggered for a moment on her feet, feeling wobbly after several days being stuck to a table.

"Bastards," Knowles growled. John noticed Cameron's fist clenching tightly, her eyes narrowed just slightly. He was pissed off too but he couldn't help smile a little at the sight of her caring for someone else, who wasn't her mission. It didn't matter where that had come from; it was hers now. *Welcome to the human race,* he thought.

Cameron helped Savannah to her feet and then approached Sarah as John's mother picked up Nagase's pistol from the ground. She ignored the viscera spattered all over her clothes and face, and looked to the cyborg. "You shouldn't have let him come," Sarah told Cameron.

"I made the call," John told her. "I know: bad John Connor; no TV for a week." Cameron pulled the AK47 from her back and handed it to Sarah, and pulled spare magazines out.

"Now we get out of here," Sarah told them.

"We've got to kill Skynet," Knowles pointed out. "That's half of why we came."

"We're not equipped for this," Sarah argued. "We come back later, better armed, and burn the place to the ground. I saw the drones," she said, remembering the video she'd seen of the dogfight, and figuring it was Cameron controlling the other ones. "Tin Miss here can just bomb the place.

Cameron froze in place as Skynet broke through the last of her firewalls and she launched her own attack, springing like a cobra as she activated a number of specially created worm programs to infect the AI and corrupt it from within. Whilst Skynet was busy fending off her assault she also copied its prior tactic and saw inside Skynet's mind, just as it had scoured hers. What she saw made her realise John and Knowles were right.

"I can't," she said. "Kaliba built this place to survive Judgement Day; the basement levels are a nuclear bunker." She could see via the building's CCTV cameras, which hacking Skynet had also given her access to, that a number of blast doors were closing in the basement, blocking their route. "Skynet's sealing itself away; not even nuclear warheads will get through."

As she engaged Skynet over cyberspace she also saw that all the fire doors to the complex were now closing as well, sealing the building so nobody could get in or out. They had the windows but she instantly knew via Skynet that the ground floors had bars on them and the second or third floors were a dangerous drop onto rock.

"Then we might as well kill it now," John said. He led the way out of the room and headed back towards Savannah and the others at the staircase. As they made their way down the corridor John saw the elevator to their right, the icons on the LED display moved upwards.

"They're coming," Sarah watched nervously.

Through the security cameras Cameron could see the interior of the elevator, for a split second before Skynet shut down the camera and cut off the feed, but that instant was all she needed. "Four mercenaries with assault rifles," she reported. "And a large bald man."

"Baldy..." Knowles growled, tightening his grip on his G-36. "He's a machine."

"We've got to go, John," Sarah said. To her dismay, instead of running, John turned towards the elevator door and stood his ground, steel in his eyes.

"Get behind us," John told Savannah as he got down on one knee and readied the grenade launcher on his M4. No more running; they were going to kill all of them. Cameron stepped half in front of him, careful to not block his line of fire as she trained the M240 at chest height, and Sarah and Knowles shouldered their assault rifles and held them tightly, watching in anticipation as the elevator car ascended. They heard a ping from inside and the doors started to open, revealing the four black clad, armed men and Baldy.

John locked eyes with the machine and saw it recognised him. Baldy lifted his gun up to fire, as did the soldiers, clearly taken aback that their targets were right in front of them as the doors opened. John fired the grenade launcher; the projectile flew into the elevator and car exploded against the cyborg's chest, rocking the floor and the walls around them. "Fire!" John shouted as Cameron opened up with the machine gun, targeting the bald T-888 – the only one still standing after the grenade explosion – and held the trigger down, sending a storm of lead flying into the machine, accompanied by John's, Sarah's and Knowles' rifle fire.

Baldy tried to move forwards but the force of the point blank machinegun fire pushed him back, tore his clothes and flesh apart and hammered into his endoskeleton. He fell back against the wall

and sagged to the floor under the sheer weight of their combined firing. Cameron ceased shooting and reached up to the top of the doorframe, curled herself up and kicked Baldy hard into the back of the car, dropped to her feet again and continued firing with the barrel inches from the Trip-Eight's face, knocking him down to the ground. Her shots penetrated through the elevator car and severed the cables holding it up. As the machine tried to push through the murderous rate of fire the elevator car plummeted downwards, out of sight.

"Is it dead?" Knowles asked.

"No chance," John replied. "Might have slowed it down, maybe bought us a minute or two." Knowles sighed wearily; what the hell actually would kill these things? As a group they continued on their way to the others at the top of the staircase. Savannah still stood guard at the top of the staircase, and she waved when she saw John, Cameron and the others approaching.

"All quiet here," she reported. She gave a two fingered salute to Sarah and nodded. "Good to see you," she added.

"Likewise," Sarah replied. She turned to Knowles and looked up at his face, wondering where she'd seen him before.

"I'm on your side now," Knowles anticipated what she was going to say. "I found out what's going on and I'm here to help you stop it: can we just get on with that, please?"

John paused for a moment, unsure of what to do. Or rather, he thought, where to go. "Danny," he said, looking at the former Kaliba employee. "How do we get to the basement from here?"

"This way," Danny took the lead and started down the stairs. Suddenly the lights went out and plunged them into darkness. Not even emergency lights were on. "Shit," he grumbled irritably, freezing in place on the stairs.

"Language!" Ellison snapped at him as he held Little-Savannah's hand and squeezed tightly. She'd already been kidnapped by Kaliba and exposed to God only knew what; he wanted to preserve as much of her innocence and childhood as he could.

"What happened to the lights?" Savannah asked.

"Skynet," Cameron replied. The AI had complete control of the building and was doing everything in its power to stop them. First deafening noise from the alarms and now darkness; she could see perfectly fine in the dark but she knew she was alone in that ability.

"Just hold onto the rail and go slow," John said. Slowly they made their way down the stairs, he trusted Cameron to tell them if there was a threat approaching. She said nothing so he assumed they were alone for the moment.

"Is everyone down?" Ellison asked after a minute.

"Yeah," Savannah replied, followed by a chorus of assent from John, Sarah, Cameron, Danny and Knowles.

"Go down the corridor to the left of the staircase and keep going until you get to another set of stairs; the basement's down there."

"Lead the way," John told Cameron. He hated having to make their way through in the dark; Skynet obviously knew its terminators had night vision and people didn't. Cameron took the point position and kept herself in front of John again. She held his free hand and guided him, just as she had back in the sewer tunnel underneath Victorville. She smiled in the darkness when she felt John squeeze her hand gently, and she returned the gesture. As she did she tried to locate controls for all internal systems.

Hostiles will be eliminated, Skynet's words resonated inside her same images as before flooded Cameron's mind; the mass murders, carnage, war and destruction: millions of images and films washed over her, slowing down her processes. Skynet had made short work

of her worm programs, she realised. She pushed her own images and memories onto Skynet; her and John Henry's war against its future incarnation, how they'd easily defeated machines that were much more advanced. Her own memories of Future John, his TechCom forces capturing Serrano Point, watching the commandos sail from the Jimmy Carter to Avila Beach, and later the memories through her own eyes as she and John strode through the captured complex. Every victory where she'd stood beside John in her original future, she shared with the AI.

That's your future, she told Skynet as she located the building's automated internal systems and started to decrypt them. *If I don't kill you John will.* She sensed Skynet's fear and anger at her images. She pushed on, feeding Skynet more files to distract it and started to wear down the building operations security systems, breaking her way through firewalls and decrypting the myriad files until she gained access to the building's automated functions. She immediately switched the lights back on, illuminating the corridor and lighting the way for them again.

"Nice work," John smiled. Cameron said nothing, she could 'feel' Skynet fighting to regain control again, and she didn't know how long she could keep it at bay.

They arrived at the staircase Danny had described without further incident. To one side of it was the entrance to the aircraft hangar and on the other side was an elevator shaft. John was halfway down them when he realised the rest of the way was blocked. A large, grey metal slab had descended and sealed the basement off. "Shit!"

"Let's try this," Savannah aimed her M4 and blasted away on full auto, firing the whole magazine off in seconds. The rounds simply bounced off harmlessly, not even scratching the paint.

"They're blast doors," Ellison said. "Designed to take a nuclear blast; we're not getting through this." Cameron drew back her fist and punched it as hard as she could. It banged loudly but didn't budge, and she didn't even make the slightest dent in the metal. She

estimated it was at least fifteen tonnes in weight and close to a metre thick. She couldn't get through it either.

"No way," John punched the blast door in anger. "We did *not* come all this way just to be beaten by a fucking door!" It wasn't possible.

"John," Sarah looked at her son and saw the pain, the anger in his face. She wanted to kill Skynet just as badly but she could see how invested he was, walking away now would crush him but what other choice did they have? "We haven't got anything that can punch through that; we can't get in."

"You've got *me,"* Cameron said. "It might take a moment." She couldn't physically open the door but there were ways around. Again she wrestled Skynet for control of the other systems; regaining the lighting had seemed too easy to Cameron, but Skynet had sacrificed control of the rest of the building to devote more of its processing power to the blast door and its inner defences. She realised it operated the building's functions such as lights, heating and electrical systems, on a separate system to internal security. It had multiple redundancies for each system, too. Skynet's internal security software was the most difficult she'd ever encountered; clearly this Skynet knew there were threats from other AIs to contend with, and had accounted for that. It would take a lot of effort for her just to open the door.

Savannah was at the top of the staircase when she heard movement from the elevator opposite. It was the same shaft they'd smashed the Triple-Eight in, which worried her all the more. "Whatever you're doing, Cameron; you'd better do it fast." She aimed her rifle at the doors as they were ripped open to reveal Baldy, his clothes and face shredded and burnt; the skin black and red, and covered in blood, strips of torn, mangled flesh hung from his wounds, and a single red eye glowed angrily through the remains of his left eye. She couldn't tell completely but he looked *pissed.* In his hands were two MP-5s, which he started to rise towards her. Oh fuck. *"Metal!"*

Chapter 35

"Metal!" without hesitation Savannah flicked her rifle to full automatic and fired off half a dozen bursts in rapid succession, pelting Baldy with fire that bounced ineffectually off his face and chest and only minutely slowed his progress as he emerged from the elevator. The T-888 raised a pair of MP-5s and she ducked back out of the way as he fired a burst; the rounds missed her by inches and chips of plaster and concrete exploded outwards from the impacts. "Shit!" she growled.

"We're trapped," Sarah said grimly, turning towards Savannah and keeping John between her and the blast door. They were down a staircase with no way forward and a machine blocking their way out; they were screwed.

"No we're not," Cameron disagreed. She looked to John, clutching his rifle and preparing to make a stand. She knew in the trapped, confined space they wouldn't survive. "I'll hold him off; head to the hangar."

John shook his head and grabbed her arm. stopping her. He'd seen her luck against Triple-Eights lately. "I'll be right behind you," she smiled. Before he could react she leapt up the stairs, taking three at a time, and was greeted at the top with a double 9mm burst from Baldy's twin submachine guns. They tore through her flesh but Cameron ignored the damage, it was only superficial and would heal. She raised her M240 at the same time and held down the trigger, hosing the other cyborg with a twenty round burst that slammed into the T-888 and paused him in his advance towards her.

"Run," she called back to John and the others as she charged Baldy, slammed him against the wall and held the machinegun's barrel under his chin. She held down the trigger and pumped more shots

into his lower jaw, shredding through the flesh and hammering into the weaker armour of the palate, where the 7.62mm rounds had a slightly less remote chance of penetrating through. She heard the others darting up the staircase and turning left into the hangar's rear entrance.

Knowles led the way into the hangar and disappeared through the door, followed by Danny, Little-Savannah, and Ellison. John stopped and watched as Baldy shoved Cameron aside and forced the machine gun from her grip before kicking her in the gut and slamming her against the wall. He held the machine gun by the barrel as she got to her feet and swung it like a bat, smacking into the side of Cameron's head and knocking her sideways. He kicked Cameron in the head as she got onto her hands and knees, sending her sprawling.

"John, come on," Sarah urged, grabbing his arm and trying to drag him into the hangar, where they could spread out and hopefully put up some kind of fight against this monster.

"I'm *not* leaving her," John snarled, shrugging out of her grasp and moving towards the machine, raising the rifle to his shoulder. Sarah looked on as her son moved *towards* the terminator, disregarding everything she'd ever trained him to do. She hated that he would so blithely risk his life for Cameron, but she knew she'd never be able to stop him, so all she could do was help. She moved beside him and shouldered the AK47 as Baldy proceeded to batter Cameron with his fists whilst she tried to get up off the floor.

"Hey!" John shot first and his rounds slammed into the Triple-Eight, pinging loudly off his skull. A split second later Sarah joined his fire with well aimed single shots of her own, knowing her rifle wouldn't penetrate his armour so she aimed for his eyes, hoping she could hit them and at least blind him.

Baldy's attention snapped immediately to the two human shooters and he immediately identified them as John and Sarah Connor; his two priority targets. He slammed Cameron's head into the ground

once more and shot up from the floor. He marched quickly towards them and bent down by the top of the staircase to pick up one of his dropped MP-5s, detecting rapid motion in his periphery as he did so; a fast moving shock of red and then a hollow whoosh.

BOOM! An explosion erupted against Baldy and threw the machine into the wall, where he collapsed to the ground. Savannah ran up the top of the staircase as John ran towards Cameron. "I'll get her!" she snapped. John was too important and she knew that her shot hadn't finished the machine off. Far from it. She ran to Cameron as the brunette cyborg got up, shaken but none the worse for wear. Savannah fired a burst of rifle fire, as did Sarah, as the two girls passed the downed machine. She felt damned glad she'd held back when the others had gone.

"Are you okay?" John asked Cameron, seeing more torn skin and muscle. The damage he could see didn't bother him; it was any injuries he couldn't that made him worried. She wasn't designed to fight other machines and he knew she got damaged sometimes.

"I'll live," she said. "Next time run," she said sternly. "But thank you," she added with a slight smile. John readied his grenade launcher as Baldy jerked back to life again, seemingly stunned by Savannah's round. A mechanical whirring sounded from down the staircase, followed by loud rumbling of something heavy being lifted.

"The blast doors," Sarah said. Cameron pushed John's rifle down and shook her head.

"It's too close; the grenade won't detonate," she told him. The machine was only a few feet away. She heard footsteps coming up the stairs: heavy, mechanical thudding of booted feet. "The T-Eight-Hundred's coming," she said.

"Hangar, now!" Sarah shoved John as hard as she could through the door and followed after him. Savannah and Cameron were right behind and pushed through the door, into the large, cavernous interior of the hangar. Inside was a vast array of machinery;

maintenance, repair, and assembly equipment, refuelling tanks and hoses, stacks of pallets and wooden and metal crates. Towards one side of the hangar was a partially disassembled HK drone, splayed open with its inner workings exposed like a machine autopsy.

"Over here!" Knowles stood up from behind the cover of a Jeep. What the hell a car was doing in the hangar, John didn't know. Towards the large doors at the front of the hangar was a single helicopter; in the massive space it seemed like half a mile away, though he reckoned it couldn't have been more than a hundred yards. The whole place looked familiar, similar to the hangar Cameron and John Henry had operated out of.

"Spread out," John told Sarah and Savannah. The younger of the two went to ground and hid beneath the gutted HK drone, whilst Sarah went around the hangar and started to flip switches, turning on machines throughout the hangar.

"Cover," she explained, remembering what Kyle had told her all those years ago. "So they have a hard time tracking us."

"Good thinking," Savannah nodded to her from her covered position. It'd be harder for the bastards to target them with so much movement in the background.

John knelt down beside Knowles, and Cameron crouched behind him. "We're spread out through the hangar," he told John and gestured to Ellison, crouched behind a large stack of wooden pallets in one corner. "The kid's hiding in the helicopter, Danny's over there," he pointed to a series of stacked metal containers lining one wall. John couldn't see Danny but it was clear he was under cover.

"I need a weapon," Cameron said to Knowles. The ex Marine pulled the Garand from his back and handed her spare clips to go with it.

"There's two machines coming our way," John called out to the others, then looked to Savannah. "The second you get a clear shot, take the first one out with the LAW, then hit the other one with the

grenades. We've only got one each, so only shoot if you can hit. Everyone else: cover us; keep their attention away from the grenade launchers. We'll take them hard and fast."

"And if that doesn't work?" Knowles asked.

"I fight one and you all attack the other," Cameron replied.

Danny stepped out of hiding and looked towards them. John could see he was clearly terrified. "Why don't we just open the hangar doors and get out of here?" he asked. They were going to be slaughtered in here.

"Skynet's sealed the building," Cameron told him.

"Can't you stop it?"

"I'm trying," she said. She was attempting to hack her way into the remaining building operations but Skynet had defences that she'd never seen before. The Skynet in the future had been unrivalled by any other AI until she and John Henry had arrived so there had been little need for online defences. This Skynet, however, had already adapted. The worm program they'd used against Serrano Point and the endo factory was proving ineffective. She had to find an alternative solution.

Ellison broke from cover and ran towards the helicopter, ignoring Knowles' shouts for him to get back. Savannah said nothing; she knew what he was doing. He opened the helicopter door and saw the young Savannah curled up on the floor, hiding beneath one of the seats in the cabin. She looked up to him with wide open eyes and as Ellison touched her arm he felt her shaking. "What's happening?" she asked him.

"We'll go home soon," he said to her, trying to sound reassuring. "There's going to be a lot of noise in a minute; whatever happens, stay down, stay still, and don't make a sound, okay?"

"Okay," she nodded, sniffling slightly.

"No matter what, stay under the seat and don't come out; I'll come get you." He smiled down at her and closed the door, sealing her inside the cabin before he made his way back to a firing position. This was no place for her at all; he just hoped when the fighting started it kept away from the helicopter.

"Remember," John told them. "Rocket first, grenades second, then fire with everything you've got." If they could take just one of the machines down before it knew what hit it then the playing field wouldn't be quite so one-sided, he thought.

All six of them took their positions behind whatever cover they could find, and six weapons pointed towards the door in the corner, waiting for the machines to come out. Time seemed to slow down in the hangar, John already felt like he'd been waiting for hours and it was making him nervous. Everyone always said waiting for the fight was the worst part; clearly they'd never fought against machines, he said to himself.

"Where the hell are they?" Sarah muttered. They'd been only a few feet behind, what was taking them so long?"

Cameron froze in place for a second as she felt the familiar presence enter her mind, hacking into her chip like before.

You can't win, Skynet told her. Not gloating or bragging, simply stating a matter of fact. The AI unleashed several worm programs that 'burrowed' into her defences and bypassed the firewalls she'd set up, forcing her to actively locate and delete them. They copied themselves and multiplied faster than she could erase them, however, and the copies replicated themselves further, digging into her mind, sifting through billions, trillions of lines of code as if searching for something. She ordered one of the X-45Cs to disengage from the air battle still raging above, and to await further instructions, then cut all network and wireless connection closing

herself off to Skynet and freeing up processing space to combat the worms embedded in her software and to look after John.

"They're here," she said quietly, knowing exactly why Skynet chose this moment to attack her and try to keep her distracted.

The door and its frame exploded into the room with an eruption of fire and smoke, hurling wood and plaster outwards, a few splinters peppered Sarah but she ignored it. Worse was about to come.

Both Baldy and Steroids rushed through the door brandishing and firing their weapons – the T-800 held an M16 with an underslung grenade launcher and fired at Savannah's position, forcing her to duck from a storm of lead that tore through the air an inch away. He'd been reluctant to leave Skynet but the AI had insisted he help eliminate the intruders, and his programming forced him to obey his master's command, always. The machines quickly spread out and moved to fire, Savannah still pinned down and unable to use the LAW, and in an instant John's plan had gone out the window as they two cyborgs unleashed a devastating hail of fire. Sarah, John and Ellison returned Baldy's fire from three different directions, popping up, shooting, and ducking back down an instant later.

"Bring it!" Knowles popped up from cover and let rip with a burst from his assault rifle, opening up on Steroids. The rounds did nothing but they got his attention away from Savannah. The T-800 turned towards him and fired but Knowles had already dropped down. Cameron pushed John down to the ground and jumped up, rapidly firing off a whole clip from the Garand at Steroids, aiming for his eyes. Her rounds smacked into his face and shredded the flesh; one round missed the lens of his eye by millimetres, but she'd known it would be unlikely she'd blind him.

Steroids shot back at her and his own rounds tore through her organics but pinged off the endoskeleton, identifying her as the most significant threat. The unknown cyborg would have to be eliminated before they could kill John Connor and these others. He aimed the grenade launcher at Cameron but John leapt from cover and fired,

stepping backwards and keeping upright, making himself a target. "Hey!" he shouted out as he fired shot after shot. "Come and get me!" Steroids immediately shifted his aim towards John but failed to notice Savannah at his five o'clock, shouldering the LAW and aiming it squarely at his back.

"Fire in the hole!" Fire erupted from the rear of the weapon as the rocket shot out of the tube and streaked through the hangar towards Steroids. The missile cut through the air and struck the T-800, a direct hit. Nothing happened. The rocket smacked into his back and dropped harmlessly to the floor, its inertia did, however, throw the machine's aim off and his own grenade crashed into the hangar door, nowhere near John.

"Piece of crap!" she growled, immediately dropping the spent launcher and raising her rifle, reaching for the trigger of the grenade launcher. Why couldn't things go right, just this once? Baldy fired another salvo that forced her back into cover again, and aimed his other MP-5 at Sarah, keeping her head down also. Steroids stepped towards John but Cameron launched herself at him and forced the weapon from his grip. "Run!" she shouted at John as the T-800 threw her down to the ground and continued on for John. She kicked out at his knee and buckled the joint, forcing him to the ground. John fired more rounds to distract the machine, but he couldn't trigger the launcher with Cameron so close.

"Cameron, move; I've got a shot."

"Help the others," she ordered him as she unleashed a rapid fire salvo of punches to Steroids' face, knocking his head around like a pinball. She jumped up and forced her knee into his midsection, bending him over double and slamming her elbow into the back of his neck, dropping him down to his knees. Steroids exploded forward and speared her stomach with his shoulder, lifting her up into the air. "Now, John," she urged him to leave her as the T-800 raised her up with one hand and slammed her into the ground. She didn't want John to risk himself for her, and if his grenade combined with

Savannah's could disable or destroy Baldy then the rest of them could come to finish off Steroids.

Sarah tried to move to John, to get him away from Cameron and the T-800, but there was no way to break from cover without being blown away. Just looking at the monster as it battled Cameron sent shivers up her spine; the face that had haunted her nightmares for over seventeen years. What made it worse was John just stood there, not running away; itching to help Cameron fight the metal Goliath.

She popped up from behind the crate she was using as cover and fired another burst at the machine as it aimed towards Savannah. The moment it turned towards her Knowles fired again from his HK-G36. Baldy watched their pattern as one by one they popped up, shot, and ducked down again. The three of them moved randomly and they never reappeared in the same place, he noticed. It was impossible to predict exactly where they would move up to fire. He detected movement to his half-right and whirled round to face it, weapon pointed forward. A mechanical arm whirred and moved left to right as it still tended the partially assembled HK drone; not a target or a threat but it and other moving machines were interfering with his motion tracking sensors. He aimed at the arm and fired a burst, tearing the machine apart and ceasing its action, lessening the interference from background movement. He quickly started to shoot at other moving parts and machines, eliminating all sources of confusion.

John tore himself from watching Cameron and Steroids smashing each other around – albeit reluctantly, accepting she was right – and watched as his mom, Savannah, and Knowles popped up, fired, and ducked down again before Baldy could shoot them, playing the deadliest ever game of Whack-a-Mole in history. He joined in the fray and added his own shots to the battle, fired a burst at the machine's head and ducked down, rolled a few feet to his right, and waited for a chance to come up again.

Danny finally burst from cover - having remained hidden up until now - and fired his rifle. He'd accidentally set it to automatic and after two

or three rounds the gun's barrel pointed upwards and his shots hit nothing but wall and ceiling. He fell backwards as the force of the auto burst caught him off balance. Baldy pointed his weapon at Danny's head and then changed his mind, lowering his aim considerably. A round caught him in the thigh and he dropped to the ground, crying out in pain. If Baldy were human he'd have grinned in satisfaction: shooting Danny Dyson in the head would have eliminated one threat; wounding him could remove several from the fight at once.

"Man down!" Knowles shouted out, intensifying his fire to make up for the loss of Danny, who leaned against the crate and clutched his wounded leg. There was so much blood, for a moment he felt sick at the sight of it. Ellison saw him go down and instinct took over. He immediately stopped firing and dashed over towards Danny. He ducked down beside him, narrowly avoiding being hit by a burst of fire.

"We shouldn't have got you involved in this," he muttered to himself as he saw the blood pouring out of him. He touched the wound and Danny screamed out. "I think it's nicked an artery," he told Danny.

The younger man had no medical knowledge or training at all, but he knew enough to tell the words 'nicked' and 'artery' in the same sentence was very bad. "Am I gonna die?" he asked nervously, shaking slightly as shock started to take over.

"Not if I can help it," Ellison said. He put his AK down on the ground and pulled his belt off. He looped it around Danny's thigh, just above the wound, and pulled on it, tightening it as much as he could. "There's no notch there," he told Danny. "Hold it as tight as you can." There wasn't much more he could do for him here; he just had to hope he could stem the bleeding enough to keep Danny alive.

"I've gotta get out of here," Danny said.

"I know," Ellison replied. He picked up the rifle and started to shoulder it. "You have to hold on."

Danny grabbed him and shook his head. "You don't understand: I need to get to a computer." Ellison looked at him strangely. "I'm useless here; I can't fight... if I can get to a computer I might be able to help."

"How?" Ellison asked.

"Cameron's fighting Skynet, right? At the same time as fighting that one over there," he pointed at Steroids as the machine hurled Cameron against a wall. "She can't beat Skynet. I know: I created it. Get me to a computer and I might be able to give her an edge." Ellison thought about it for a moment. Danny was right; he was no fighter at all, he shouldn't be here. A computer was his best weapon.

"Cover us!" Ellison yelled to the others. He helped Danny to his feet and used himself as a support, the younger man leaning on his shoulders as they limped towards the door they'd come in from.

"Where are you going?" John shouted out, catching them about to leave the hangar. This wasn't the time to split up and run away. Danny: he wasn't too surprised at. But Ellison...

"Danny's got an idea," Ellison called back. "Give us five minutes." As quickly as they could with only three functioning legs between them, they exited the hangar and made their way down the corridor. Ellison let Danny point out the way; he knew where he was going and what he was going to do. Hopefully it would help.

"This isn't going well," Knowles shouted to John as he got down a few feet from the ex Kaliba mercenary. Knowles fired again but this time Baldy didn't bother shooting back. He stared straight towards John, their eyes meeting for a fraction of a second.

TARGET: JOHN CONNOR

TERMINATE

Baldy's eyes glowed bright red in anticipation as he recognised John. He ignored the shots from the others and aimed his submachine gun at John.

"No!" Sarah barged John out of the way as Baldy fired. A single shot slammed into her and knocked her backwards, blood erupting out from her midsection as Baldy realigned his weapon for the finishing shot.

"No you don't!" Knowles burst from cover and blasted Baldy with the shotgun. The solid steel slug smashed into his breastplate, not damaging it but the force of the shot knocked him aside as he fired again, the 9mm rounds harmlessly hitting the wall. Knowles rapidly cocked the Winchester and fired again, hitting Baldy's wrist and knocking the MP-5 from his hand. A third shot cracked his head backwards as John dragged Sarah behind a crate. Blood was pouring out of an entry wound in her stomach.

"Mom..." John stared in shock at her, feeling numb all over, ignoring the fight raging around them and the fact that Savannah and Knowles were fighting Baldy on their own now. Booming shotgun blasts and staccato bursts of rifle fire forced the machine backwards, on the back foot. *Oh God,* he thought. "What can I do?" he asked, all first aid knowledge had flown out the window; she'd been shot but he was in even more shock than her. He pulled his shirt off and scrunched it into a ball, pulled hers up to expose the wound, just above her belly button. Her entire abdomen was covered in dark crimson blood that kept pouring out. He pressed his shirt down hard on the wound, trying to put enough pressure on it to slow the bleeding.

"I'll be fine," Sarah told him, grimacing in pain. She held onto his impromptu dressing and with her free hand she picked up his rifle and shoved it into his chest.

"I can't just leave you like this," John protested.

"You can and you will," she snapped, fighting through the pain. "Or else we'll all be dead. You know that."

"Grenade!" Savannah triggered her launcher and the projectile smashed into Baldy from the side, rending metal, tearing already weakened armour plating and sending him staggering to the left. Organic nerves and the fine network of almost microscopic cybernetic sensors flared up, warning him of the severe damage he'd sustained.

Before the sound of the explosion had even died down, Knowles pumped slug after slug into Baldy, sending him staggering several paces until he toppled over and fell to the ground. "He's down!" Knowles shouted. *But not out;* within moments the machine stirred and started to move again.

"John, finish him," Sarah grunted from the floor. John stepped backwards and aimed the launcher at Baldy's head as the machine started to stagger to his feet. Something crashed behind him and John turned to see Cameron fly into a stack of wooden pallets and demolish them. They collapsed in on her, burying her underneath. The T-800 turned towards John and stared like a hungry wolf that had just located tasty, vulnerable prey. John didn't see the machine moving in for the kill. He didn't see a terminator closing in to complete its standing orders. All he saw was the machine that was too much for Cameron to handle, that was slowly beating her down.

"Fuck you," he spat and turned the M203 towards Steroids, forgetting all about Baldy as he rose up behind him. John pulled the trigger and the grenade smashed square into Steroids' chest, exploding in a loud flash of flame and smoke that knocked the large, powerful machine off his feet. He ran towards Cameron, narrowly avoiding Badly's fist as the machine swiped out at where his head had been a second ago. Savannah moved in close and dived at his feet, sweeping his legs out from under him. Sarah grabbed a gun and fired from her prone position, as did Savannah, keeping their weapons on him as Knowles reloaded the shotgun.

"For fuck's sake, John!" Sarah shouted out, finding herself supremely pissed. She looked at Baldy as she fired, *really* looked at him. Exposed metal was everywhere, and there were several cracks and gashes visible in his hyperalloyed chest armour from the three 40mm grenades he'd taken. The machine was moving sluggishly; he'd been damaged. That last grenade might've finished him off, but John *had* to go and use it on the other one. Why did he have to use his heart instead of his head?

John ignored his mother's shouts and ran to the pile of pallets, ignoring the danger from Steroids, who lay unmoving on the ground. Baldy had taken three rounds and was still kicking, so he reckoned he'd only stunned it and had seconds until it found its senses once again. He saw a petite hand, cut and abraded, sticking out through the broken planks of wood and grabbed it, heaving hard and pulling her out.

"You okay?" he asked, seeing Steroids in his periphery, stirring, starting to move again. He expected another lecture from her about his safety, how he should be careful and she could look after herself, or how she wasn't important compared to him.

"Yes, thank you," she replied, pleasantly surprising him. She knew why he'd done it, and although it was a risk she was grateful. She kissed his cheek lightly and stepped in front of him protectively as Steroids got to his feet. "Leave me," she told him.

"Not happening," John snapped adamantly.

"You're in the way," she told him coldly. He felt deflated for a moment but as Steroids go to his feet, standing much taller and broader than either of them, he saw what she meant: Steroids was larger and much stronger than Cameron; he had a height, weight, and range on his side. Cameron had a few advantages, mostly in nimbleness and intelligence, but in order to stand any chance she needed to give it all she had, and he realised she couldn't do that if he was nearby and she was constantly worrying about Steroids breaking off and getting hold of him.

He noticed Cameron's intense stare, her eyes locked onto Steroids and the hostility – no, *hatred* within. Even when she'd been trying to kill him, only inches from him on his birthday, he'd never seen anything like it. He knew when he was in the way, and, albeit reluctantly, he moved to join the others as they fired and evaded Baldy. He looked back to see the intense look on her face and felt a surge of guilt as he walked away. Leaving her to fight alone was the hardest decision he'd ever had to make.

Steroids turned to John as he moved away but Cameron immediately put herself between her charge and her opponent. She looked at the cyborg, and Steroids stared back, their gazes meeting and within was a single, unspoken message was shared between them in a fraction of a second. Steroids wanted John dead as much as Skynet did. Cameron loved him with everything she had, and she would do everything in her power to protect him. Only one of them would survive and only one of them would succeed.

Streams of data flooded into her consciousness as Skynet attacked her once more, initiating another worm program that managed to bypass her firewalls and other security systems and immediately started to replicate and scour through her files, memories and lines of code that made up Cameron. She deleted them as rapidly as she could, erasing the malicious, hostile programs by the hundreds, they kept multiplying exponentially, perusing through her data systematically, as if searching for something.

Interesting, Skynet 'said' to her as it located the program she'd buried down deep inside her: the order to kill John. **You're programmed to terminate John: why don't you complete your mission?**

I'm not a terminator anymore, she replied adamantly. *I'll never hurt John.*

We'll see, Skynet said. It redirected its worm – one so advanced that Cameron had yet to create an effective countermeasure against it – to attack the layers upon layers of multiple-encrypted firewalls

around that section of programming, which she had protected like a fortress. Cameron fought back with a self-made defensive software suite, slowing its progress into a stalemate.

At the same time, Cameron fought fire with fire. She'd been designed by Future-Skynet to learn, above all things except her primary mission. She was a learning machine, and learn she did. In the time it took for a human to blink she'd isolated one of Skynet's worm programs, dissected it, started to create an effective tool to counter it, and at the same time she created her own version, imprinting herself in part onto the program, with one objective in mind: destroy Skynet.

Cameron experienced something she'd only felt once before, and never to this intensity. Her hand shook and twitched, fingers jerking erratically as she stared down the larger machine. Steroids wanted to kill John; Skynet was trying to hack into her, to force her to kill John. The shaking in her hand grew considerably worse as she fought to contain the rage simmering within her. She unconsciously calculated her odds of success but ignored the low number she generated.

"Fuck you," she said simultaneously to both AI and T-800, taking a leaf from Savannah's very colourful vocabulary. Cameron unleashed her own adapted worm program and at the same time charged towards the larger machine opposite her. She was going to kill Steroids and she was going to kill Skynet; there was nothing else to consider.

The fire alarm shrieked blaringly, a deafening klaxon wailing at ear splitting volume, warning any and all to get the hell out of the building. Despite the din, nobody was there to benefit from the alarm; the corridors were empty with the exception of one. "Fucking Connor!" Coleman groaned as he hurried along the passage, clutching his limp, useless arm and making his way through the

darkened complex. Everyone else had already fled, he had no idea where Pearce and Townsend were; probably out with everyone else on the helicopters, scrambling to be taken aboard the few aircraft that could carry maybe two dozen between them.

There were over a hundred people working in the building, and only three helicopters; he *had* to get to them before they took off. He ran faster and turned a corner, accidentally catching his arm against the wall. Pain tore through his shoulder and he cried out, almost dropping to the floor in agony. He'd hit his shoulder hard when he'd jumped out of the window and he was pretty sure it was dislocated, and his arm was broken in at least one place; it hurt like fucking hell, but he tried as best as he could to fight through the pain. Connor had managed to beat their security forces and break out his mother; if the two cyborgs couldn't stop them then Sarah would recognise him out of the people left stranded, and blow him away.

With a grimace of pain shooting up from his shoulder and pushed himself to go faster. He let go of his shoulder and reached into his pocket with his good hand, pulling out a Smith & Wesson revolver, just in case he ran into anyone less than friendly.

Finally he made it out of the building and at the edge of the small airfield they'd constructed and saw the helicopters still outside, a crowd of people outside all clamoured to get aboard. He saw Townsend and Pearce were sat in the back of one, with four of the black clad mercenaries. He marched towards them, pushing his way through the crowd and waving his pistol to move people aside.

"You're supposed to protect us from this kind of thing," he snapped at the nearest merc, taking out his anger and broken arm on the man. "That's what we're paying you for."

"Fuck off!" the hired gun snapped. "We were butchered out there. I fucking quit: you can keep your damn money." He just wanted to get the hell out of there, out of the circuit for life, too. No amount of money was worth this kind of shit. He'd risked his life for the cash before, sure, but not the slaughter that it had been – fourteen men

dead in five minutes, and he'd heard nothing from the others inside. He assumed they were gone too.

"Fine," Coleman glowered as he stepped closer to the helicopter. He got inside and sat down with Townsend and Pearce.

"Where's Nagase?" Pearce asked.

"Connor got him," Coleman shouted above the roar of the engines above them. "John broke his mother out; they're inside now."

Townsend leaned forward and looked at him suspiciously. "How did you get away?"

"I jumped out the window," he snapped. "That's how I broke my fucking arm." He turned around in his seat to the pilot. "Take off."

"What about the others?" One of the other mercenaries asked, indicating towards the people outside.

"Fuck 'em," he slid the door closed, sealing the four armed men and three Greys in the back of the helicopter. "Take off, now."

The door slid open again and one of the engineers who'd worked on the Dragonflies reached in and tried to pull Coleman out. "You can't leave us here," he snapped angrily, yanking at the Grey's suit, gripping him by the lapels on his jacket. Coleman felt himself being pulled out and instantly pointed the revolver at the engineer's head. He pulled the trigger before the man had any chance to react and blew half his skull away, splattering the people behind with bone, blood and shreds of brain. The engineer blinked once and dropped to the ground. The other civilian workers backed away, staring at him in disbelief.

"What the hell are you doing?" one of the mercenaries asked him accusingly, wondering if he'd get the same treatment if not for the fact he was heavily armed. Coleman ignored him and pulled the door

shut once again, then leaned towards the pilot and put the gun to his head.

"Take off *now!"* he ordered. The pilot shrugged and flipped a number of switches, pressed harder on the pedals at his feet and the helicopter began to rise. "There are two other choppers," he said to the others. "Let them sort it out between them." He put the gun on his lap and reached for his pack of Morleys in his breast pocket. Using only his good arm he pulled it out and placed it between his lips, took out a lighter and lit up the cigarette. He took a deep drag and leaned back in his seat. The nicotine did nothing for his arm but he needed something to relieve the stress. Once they were back in the world and his arm was fixed he decided his next priority would be a strong drink to calm his nerves.

He noticed the tense silence in the helicopter and saw one of the soldiers staring at him, then looking to the 'no smoking' sign on one of the windows. "I don't care," he snapped, making a show of sucking on the cigarette and blowing the smoke out into the cabin. This had been a really shitty day and he needed to unwind. He watched the mountains outside as they flew along the range, leaving everything behind them.

Suddenly another, horrific thought came to mind. He'd abandoned Skynet, so had Pearce and Townsend. If Baldy and Steroids succeeded in killing Connor and his team then they'd surely come looking for the three of them; there'd be no chance to explain, no mercy. The two cyborgs would execute them on the spot for deserting Skynet. They'd find him for sure; it was what they did. After years of working for Skynet, both in the future and in the past, and despite trying to kill them for some time, he found himself in the ridiculous position of rooting for the Connors, and chuckled in his seat, despite the pain. *Oh, the irony,* he thought.

"This is it," Danny groaned, pointing at the door to his lab. Ellison kicked the door open and helped Danny through, dragged him to a chair and eased him onto it. He ignored the trail of blood behind them. The interior of the room was large, white, and spotless. Rows of computers lined up against one wall, and a single large desk, where they were at now, at the head of the room.

Inside the white-tiled, sterile section of the room was a large black plastic and metal box with winking blue and red lights on it. It was connected via a number of cables to several servers and to another computer on a table next to it.

"This is where we built Skynet," Danny explained, gritting his teeth against the pain. "Right here in this lab."

"Is that it?" Ellison asked hopefully, pointing to the black processor. It looked powerful, like a supercomputer. Or so he figured a supercomputer would look.

Danny shook his head. "No, just a virtual model we used to run simulations on." He remembered the countless hours he spent leading the AI team, running hundreds of simulations on power yield, how many servers to provide it, and what it would be capable of. All of it had led to the thing in the basement trying to kill them all, and again he felt ashamed of it. He tried to ignore the pain as best he could as he typed away at the desktop computer, staring at the screen as he brought up the login screen and typed in his username and password.

ACCESS DENIED.

"Oh, come on!" He tried again with the same result: *access denied.* He racked his brain, trying to think. It didn't help he'd lost at least a good pint of blood.

"What's wrong?" Ellison asked.

"They've blocked my access; must've thought I was dead or suspected switched sides. I'm cut off." Those bastard Greys... *"Coleman!"* he said excitedly. The Grey hadn't noticed Danny watching him entering his own login details a few months back. He'd memorised it, more out of curiosity than anything else, or if he'd been fired he could have tried to revenge-hack Kaliba. Now he was glad he'd memorised it.

He entered Coleman's username and password, and seconds later he was granted access. A plain, pale blue screen appeared with a series of icons.

"You're in," Ellison clapped him on the back. He tried to ignore the blood that was running faster out of his leg now. It was pooling down on the floor by his feet, but Danny ignored it: he had work to do. His fingers danced rapidly over the keyboard as he worked his magic and gained access to the building's security systems. He'd been a computer whizz all his life; when other kids had been playing sports, seeing friends and going on dates, he'd been in his room with a computer. He'd been tempted before to hack the defence network, just to see if he could, but he'd heard nasty things happened to those that tried and were caught. He started to feel dizzy and lightheaded as more blood pooled up around the bottom of his seat, but he ignored it. He struggled to focus and concentrate, staring intently at the screen.

He bypassed a number of firewalls set up to protect the security systems, finding himself surprised at how easy it was. "Cameron must be doing a good job," he muttered. He'd created it to be able to handle any attack on itself. They'd run a number of simulations where staff members would attempt to hack in using every trick they'd had, but Skynet had dealt almost effortlessly with each and every attempt, convincing Danny, Coleman and everyone else involved in the project that their AI was the most secure computer on earth. He'd never anticipated someone trying whilst it was already under attack by another AI, however. Streams of data ran down the screen and he absorbed it all like a sponge.

"How can you read that?" Ellison wondered aloud.

"Computer language," Danny replied, never looking away from the screen for a moment. "Advanced dork, if you want a name for it."

"What's it say?"

Now, Danny turned around to Ellison and grinned. "Skynet's got its hands full; it's going all out against Cameron." He looked back and saw the reports of malicious software bouncing back and forth between the two AIs. "They're evenly matched; they're tearing at each other's data; they're gonna kill each other."

"How is that even possible?" Ellison asked. He'd seen how Skynet had hacked John Henry but it had used the body to try and kill the computer, could Cameron or Skynet kill the other? He'd assumed they'd have to physically smash up the computer that was Skynet.

"It's... complicated," Danny said as he typed. "If Cameron can bypass all of Skynet's defences then in theory she could start deleting files. If she deletes all of them, or enough of them, then she kills Skynet." He didn't know if an AI could feel pain but he knew that the experience would be like having your memories and thoughts torn from you and erased one at a time until there was nothing left. "Death by a thousand cuts," he said. "Unfortunately, it could go the other way: Skynet could get the upper hand and kill Cameron, too." They were just too evenly matched; it could go either way.

Ellison leaned over his shoulder and looked at the screen, trying to make sense of the gibberish rapidly scrolling down the screen. "Can you do anything?" he asked.

"Watch me," Danny cracked his knuckles and got down to work, feeling more and more sluggish as he bled out onto the floor, but he forced himself to concentrate; more important things were on the line here. The entire building was AI controlled, though Cameron had wrested control of the lights back from Skynet. He was glad of it; the machines were already more than they could handle; fighting them in

the dark would've been a slaughter. He started work on accessing the building controls, and minutes of furious typing and some clever manoeuvring on his part, Danny had gained full access to all security and operational systems in the building. He accessed the blast door controls.

"I'm in," he told Ellison. On the screen appeared a single prompt in green letters: *OPEN BLAST DOOR: Y/N?*

Danny pressed the *Y* key as hard as he could, and a the dialogue box disappeared, replaced a moment later with: *BLAST DOOR OPENING...*

"Good work," Ellison clapped Danny on the shoulder. He made no response. A moment later Danny keeled over to the side, fell off the chair and collapsed on the floor. Ellison was on him in seconds.

"Danny... *Danny!" Please, God...* Ellison leaned over the kid and checked his pulse; it was weak, shallow and slow, just barely there. Danny's eyes had rolled up to the back of his head, and it took a moment for Ellison to realise he was kneeling in a puddle of Danny's blood, which was now almost as wide as he was tall, and it took him a second to realise what had happened. The whole time he'd been hacking, trying to open the blast door, he hadn't been holding his makeshift tourniquet. It had loosened and there'd been nothing to slow the blood loss. *"Crap!"* he swore uncharacteristically. He manoeuvred Danny into the recovery position on his side, got up and reached for a cable at the back of the computer, seeing nothing better. He ripped it free from the computer with a shower of sparks erupting, before unplugging it and wrapping it around Danny's leg, just above the loosened belt. He tied it up as tight as he could and did the same with the belt, hoping to keep what was left of Danny's bloodstream still inside him.

"Hang on, kid," Ellison muttered as he ran out of the room. He looked left and right before finally deciding to go right, for no particular reason, and set off in search. He needed a first aid kit and he needed it now.

The fight raged through the hangar still; John, Savannah and Knowles firing shot after shot at Baldy. John fired half a dozen rounds at the T-888 and it staggered towards him, almost drunkenly. The invincible, ruthlessly efficient killing machine had been transformed into a slow, lumbering brute, and he reckoned with all the damage from three grenades and the rest of it, that something had shaken loose. It helped that the Triple-Eight had lost both its weapons and was now barehanded against them. Both Baldy's eyes glowed an angry red behind the organic orbs and he seemed to have trouble deciding which of them to attack. They were winning, slowly, he could sense it.

"Just fucking die already!" Savannah groaned, having had enough of this shit as she emptied her rifle into him and leapt out of the way as the machine charged her, narrowly avoiding being steamrollered by the powerful terminator. She ran as fast as she could to get away from it, heading towards Knowles. The ex Marine watched as the machine chased her and took aim with the Winchester, pointing at a spot between girl and machine, leading the terminator as if he were hunting duck. He fired once and the round slammed into Baldy's head, knocking him sideways slightly and stopping him from catching up with Savannah.

One by one they all fired and moved away from Baldy, keeping just out of his reach whilst others carried on shooting, dividing his attention. John had learnt to keep out of sight and attack from behind or to the sides, and when Baldy did catch his attention the others would fire everything they had to keep the machine away. As intense as their fighting was, though, it was nothing compared to the Battle Royale between Cameron and Steroids. All the combatants, even Baldy, would occasionally glance at the two cyborgs savagely trying to annihilate each other.

The two machines raged across the far end of the hangar near the main entrance and the metal warriors inflicted blows on each other

that would have killed any human and should have crippled most machines, yet somehow they both remained standing. Steroids' chassis and skull was dented in numerous places and one shoulder joint was damaged. Cameron's right eye flickered erratically behind its organic disguise, damaged from a brutal blow inflicted by the larger machine that was affecting her vision. She was just as banged up as her opponent.

Steroids pushed Cameron against the Jeep and slammed her face first into the hood, crumpling the thin steel and smacking her into the engine block underneath. He lifted her up and repeated the action again and again, obliterating the car and using Cameron's face as a hammer. She kicked back and knocked his left shin out from under him, reached onto the front of the car and braced herself before pushing back as hard as she could, forcing the larger machine backwards. She looked to see where John was and saw him shooting at Baldy, wisely keeping his distance. *Good,* she thought. He was taking his own advice about staying safe.

She reached into the hood and tore the engine out, swung it around and slammed it into Steroids' face, giving him the same treatment she'd received seconds ago. She dropped it and charged the T-800, spearing him in his midsection and with strength belying her small frame, threw him onto a worktable next to the wall. Cameron moved towards him and ripped a fire extinguisher off the wall. She raised it above her head but Steroids shot up and punched it away, taking her completely by surprise. She didn't have time to react before he grabbed her by the neck and slammed her down onto the table, pinned her in place and picked up a plasma torch from a workbench. He ignited it and held it over Cameron's face. She struggled to push him away; the torch could severely damage her, but he was too strong and he leaned his whole weight onto her neck.

He aimed the torch over her left eye and the superheated gas melted the organic orb and sent milky white liquid running down her face, exposing her glowing blue machine eye. Damage reports flooded through her consciousness in the form of pain unlike anything she'd

experienced before as intense heat proved too much and the lens of her eye cracked and exploded. Pain flared through the ruined sensor as well as the disturbing knowledge she was now half blind and severely damaged.

"Cameron!" she heard John shout as he started towards her, intent on helping.

"Stay away," she called back, desperation in her voice. As long as he was safe and away from the machine, that was all that mattered.

He cares about you, Skynet said, knowing it could take advantage of that. Slowing Cameron down, increasing her damage, would force Connor to come to her aid, providing the T-800 with a chance to terminate him even if it was unable to destroy her.

Steroids started to move the plasma torch over to the other eye and she tried to turn her head away, struggling to avoid being blinded. Something solid and metallic struck the back of Steroids' head and he pulled the torch away, pulled back upright and partially turned around, still holding Cameron with one hand, to see the younger Savannah stood a few feet away.

"Leave her alone!" she shouted at Steroids, anger written clearly on her face for all to see. Cameron was her friend, she remembered chatting to her on the couch in the safehouse, how the cyborg had made her laugh, how much John loved her, and she hated seeing her being hurt so badly. She held a wrench in one hand and threw it as hard as she could at Steroids. It clanged loudly on the exposed metal of his forehead and fell to the ground, predictably doing nothing at all.

Steroids identified Savannah instantly and knew she was no threat. He wouldn't have to kill her to remove her; scaring her away would suffice. He made his eyes glow bright red and took one step towards her, stamping his foot down with enough force to shatter the concrete floor and send a slight tremor along the ground beneath

her. All her bravery fled and with a single, terrified shriek Little-Savannah screamed and ran away.

She might have been ineffective against Steroids but the momentary distraction was enough for Cameron. In one move she grabbed the plasma torch's power cable and ripped it as hard as she could, the flame immediately died down and faded away a moment later. She grabbed a metal rod from the table – part of the partially assembled HK Drone's components - and jammed it as hard as she could into Steroids' eye, impaling through the organic orb and shattering the cybernetic ocular sensor beneath. *An eye for an eye.* She knew where the phrase had come from; John Henry and Ellison had often discussed religion and the Bible.

Cameron immediately went on the attack again, unleashing a rapid salvo of kicks and punches, using her more agile, nimble frame to outmanoeuvre the larger cyborg and dodge his blows, her every move fuelled further with desperation to protect John and to destroy the machines who would kill him. As she did so she opened her connection to Skynet again and unleashed every attack she had, viruses and worms flooded the AI, all adapted from the ones it had used to try and hack her, and her cybernetic brain worked even more rapidly than her fists as she worked to override Skynet's security systems. At the same time she set her sights on Skynet itself; if they couldn't physically destroy Skynet then she intended to erase it herself line by line.

Knowles fired the last slug from his shotgun into Baldy, knocking the machine sideways. Out of ammo, he jumped forwards and swung the shotgun like a club with a primal scream, shattering it against the machine's head. The terminator didn't even flinch and with reflexes a preying mantis would envy, shot out a hand and grabbed him by the throat, lifting him up in the air even as John and Savannah shot him. He jerked with every shot that hit him, but still wasn't deterred. Knowles struggled against its iron grip but it was hopeless and he

knew it. He glared at the machine, watching as Savannah and John moved to flank it. How the fuck did you actually kill these things? He wondered, knowing he'd never find out.

He saw Savannah pull something out of her pocket but couldn't tell what. His stare fell onto the machine's soulless glowing eyes and he steeled himself for what was about to come. "I hope you fucking rust!" He spat in its face a split second before Baldy squeezed hard around his neck. He heard a crack, felt a split second of pain, and then he was gone.

One more threat neutralised, Baldy dropped Knowles' body, leapt at John and threw a hard punch at his primary target's head. *Fuck!* John instinctively moved back and thrust the rifle up to shield his face, a split second ahead of the machine's timing. A fist-sized freight train smashed into the M4 and broke the weapon in half, propelling John several metres across the hangar and he landed on his back with a crunch as he hit the floor. He tried to sit up and pain tore through his backside, realising something must have broken when he hit the ground; with effort he managed to fight through it and slowly rolled onto his front to push himself up as Baldy moved towards him.

"Hey slap head!" Savannah dived at Baldy from behind and took his legs out from under him, dropping him to the floor. She rolled out from the tackle and hosed him down with a burst from her rifle. Baldy lashed out at her leg and his booted foot smashed into her shin with a *crack. "Fuck!"* Her right leg collapsed beneath her and she fell to her knees as Baldy got up to his feet and stood over Savannah as she levelled the M4 at him, trembling in agony, knowing this was her last stand. She didn't feel any fear, just an intense desire to take this thing with her.

Before she could pull the trigger Baldy swiped a large hand out and backhanded her harshly in the face, smacking her down onto side and sending her rifle skittering across the floor, out of reach.

"Over here!" Sarah struggled to pull herself up and fired at the machine's back but it did nothing, and in moments it was too close to both Savannah and John for her to fire without risking hitting them. "John: run!" she shouted as he got up to his feet.

As she fell, Savannah felt a something hard and round in her thigh pocket, and instead of resigning herself to death, she reached in and grasped its cylindrical shape. She grinned wolfishly as she recalled what it was. *Thermite grenade.* She had one last card left to play. She examined the machine as it approached her and looked at its chest; a torn, burnt and twisted breastplate beneath scorched, ripped flesh. There was a gap in the armour where the plate had been bent out of shape; probably from her last grenade, she reckoned. She didn't know if she'd be able to do it or not.

"Do it!" She growled at the machine, glaring hatefully into its demonic red eyes. As Baldy towered over her she pulled a knife out with her other hand and thrust upwards as a distraction. Baldy intercepted the move, grabbed her by the wrist and squeezed hard. Savannah's agonised scream echoed throughout the hangar as both bones in her wrist were snapped like toothpicks. Still, Baldy didn't let go. He pulled her upwards, forcing her instinctively to stand, putting weight on her broken shin and sending jolts of lightning up her leg and through her body as the broken shards of bone stabbed into the meat of her calf. She roared out again but forced herself to focus through the pain; it could be controlled, she told herself as she tried to switch off from it and concentrated on the task at hand as the machine prepared to deliver a killer blow.

With lightning reflexes borne of desperation and anger she whipped out the thermite grenade as fast as she could and shoved it into the gap in his breastplate before Baldy registered what was happening, pushing as hard as she could; it scraped against the metal and she just about managed to wedge it in place. Baldy looked down at her for a moment and found himself confused at her inane grin.

"We win," she grimaced as the T-888 let go of her, realising she'd tricked him, and as he did she fell back, pulling the pin as she went.

She immediately rolled away with the last of her strength as Baldy reached for the foreign object she'd inserted into his chest. too late.

The grenade went off with a shower of sparks and rapidly heated up, glowing white hot and forcing both John and Sarah to shield their eyes. The former grabbed the redhead under her armpits and dragged her away. The grenade burned through vital power distribution components in Baldy's chest, the heat blossomed outwards and burnt through armour, power conduits, working parts, and finally the fuel cell cracked under the intense temperature. Sparks flew out from the T-888 and Baldy stopped moving; his hand fused to his chest from the heat, welded together. Extreme damage reports flooded into Baldy's awareness in the last few moments of his existence. A flood of data telling him that the power cell casing was severely compromised, then the fuel cell failed as it was consumed in the miniature sun inside his chest, melted down, and the world faded into blackness.

The T-888 fell to the ground, inert, lifeless. John looked to the other side of the hangar and saw the other battle between Cameron and Steroids, however, was still raging, and Cameron was losing. Fighting the T-800 whilst at the same time playing catch with Skynet over cyberspace was incredibly taxing, and she was using so much processing power to keep the AI from turning off the lights and flooding the hangar with fire suppressant gas, as well as trying to kill it and keep it from corrupting her own systems, that it slowed her reaction times down significantly, giving the larger machine even more of an advantage. She was struggling, and John could see it. He picked up an assault rifle from the many scattered on the ground and hobbled towards them. "Hang on, Cameron," he muttered, shouldering the weapon and aiming at the larger machine.

"Don't," Sarah tried to stop him but she could barely move. John fired a single shot and the round smacked into his head, pinging loudly. Steroids barely seemed to notice, however, and threw Cameron into the jeep. She crashed into the metal and glass and wrecked the vehicle's chassis, and Steroids moved towards John.

"Run!" Cameron shouted at him. As she pulled herself out from the wreckage she sensed something; control of all security systems had been wrested from Skynet. Someone else was trying to hack Skynet. She noticed Danny's absence and knew it was likely to be him, but it didn't matter who. She reopened the link to the one remaining UCAV she'd ordered away from the air battle, relieved to find it was still intact and airborne, and gave it one last order.

"The blast door is open," she shouted to John – realising Danny had been the invisible ally she'd detected whilst attacking Skynet, and as she ran at Steroids, grabbed his arm and pulled him away from John. "Run," She told him again.

John hesitated, not wanting to leave her to face the machine alone. *"Run!"* she snapped at him as she wrapped her arms around Steroids' waist and lifted him up off his feet. He instantly fought back and smashed his elbow into her already damaged face, shattering the cracked orb of her eye. She looked to John with her one remaining eye, pleading with him. "I can't hold him any longer," she said as she stepped backwards towards the far side of the hangar with him in her grasp. "Please John, just go," she all but begged him, her voice as pleading as when she'd begged John not to kill her. John nodded and hobbled as fast as he could towards the entrance Danny and Ellison had left from. Savannah had started to shuffle away and his mom had moved towards her slowly. He hated leaving them like this but what other choice did he have? Skynet could still kill them all if he didn't stop it.

As he reached the door he heard a low whine of jet engines getting louder by the second. *What the hell was that?* Steroids brought an elbow down on top of Cameron's head hard enough to loosen her grip and he slammed her down to the ground and punched her so hard that her whole body jerked. He got up from her and turned to John as the engine drone became deafening, sounding closer and closer. Cameron shot up and grabbed his arm, pulling him closer to her, knowing what was about to happen.

The UCAV ploughed through the roof and crashed right on top of both cyborgs, exploding in a massive eruption of fire that blossomed outwards and burned brilliantly, consuming everything caught within it. John stared in horror as several tonnes of jet aircraft smashed into the person he loved most. He went numb as he watched, the sight replaying itself again and again in his head before it hit hard exactly what had just happened, and John's entire world fell apart.
"CAMERON!"

Chapter 36

The fighter control centre at Edwards Air Force Base was a scene of near chaos as radar operators and fighter and air traffic controllers struggled to work out what the hell was going on. Their screens were filled with the signatures of aircraft moving quickly, circling each other singly, in pairs and in packs. Colonel Schiff stood over the shoulder of a nervous young lieutenant manning a radar screen and watched the blips as they moved towards each other in what he knew to be dog fighting manoeuvres. A number of signatures disappeared very quickly, indicating aircraft had either descended under the radar and were using the cover of the mountains to hide themselves, or had been shot down. Given the fact they didn't return into view Schiff was pretty sure which one it was.

"Does anyone have any goddamn clue what's going on out there?" a captain called out, clearly as confused as everyone else.

The lieutenant sat in front of Schiff spoke up in reply: "There's nothing there, sir. They're fighting over the Sierra Crest, but there's nothing on our records. These other aircraft appeared out of nowhere?"

Not quite true, Schiff knew. But the top brass had agreed to keep Kaliba's location a secret; the paranoid bastards whose careers had been made during the suspicious eras of the Cold War seemed to sympathise with the secretive and reclusive company – in other words, he reckoned; their anonymity was guaranteed in exchange for what had clearly been a too-good-to-be-true price for both their AI production and advanced UCAVs. Still, he couldn't tell anyone here about what was there.

"Sir!" a sergeant manning a radio console and a PC called out. "Cyber Command's just confirmed to us that the defence net's being

hacked again. Creech AFB reports a whole squadron of Reapers and a flight of X-45Cs just took off on their own."

"Radar tracking confirms that!" Another NCO piped up. "Incoming trajectory confirms they originated from Creech."

None of this told Captain Barrow what he needed to know, however. He frowned in frustration. "Who're the other aircraft?" he snapped. "Someone find out. Is this the Russians, somehow slipped past our net?" Doubtful, he thought. Medvedev had threatened retaliations, sure, but no Russian planes would have the range to get here without midair refuelling, the odds of eluding radar en route would be remote – they'd have to fly in at a hair above sea level to stand a chance – and what would be the *point?* There was nothing in the Sierra Nevada Mountains; if he was running a strike op, he reckoned he'd take out this very facility, or better yet to attack the Navy ships anchored in San Diego Bay. It wouldn't be worth it when there were better ways to show off you mean business, he thought.

But if it's not the Russians, then who the hell is it? And who the hell's controlling our birds up there?

"Satellite imagery shows some kind of building in the Crest," someone reported. "There's been an explosion; one of the drones disappeared off the radar just above the building's coordinates – looks like it crashed into it, sir."

Schiff moved from behind the radar screen and walked up to Barrow. "I know what's up there."

The captain turned to him with a suspicious look on his face. "Care to share, sir?" he asked.

"Classified," Schiff replied curtly. He noticed the slight annoyed exhale, the drop of the captain's eyes in disappointment, but he ignored it. He reckoned he'd be feeling the same if their roles were reversed. "But I need a platoon of SFs and helicopters ready ASAP." He looked at another screen, indicating the aircraft still buzzing

around over the mountains. "And a flight of Raptors providing escort," he added. Judging from the screen, they were going to need them.

"Cameron," John staggered on his feet and nearly fell, his legs threatening to quit beneath him. He stared at the brightly burning flames and the smashed wreckage of the UCAV, smoke pouring out and filling up the hangar, some of it escaping through the large gaping hole it had created. He stared unblinking at the crash, scouring for any signs of movement beyond the flames, hoping to catch a flicker; an arm reaching out, a hit of glowing blue... *anything.*

Savannah stared too at the horrible sight. The roiling flames, whilst orange and red rather than bluish white, had still consumed someone dear to all of them – except maybe Sarah. Visions of Ellison caught in the flames came to mind and she knew exactly what John must be going through. She looked back to him and saw not a look of desperation or rage, like she'd had at her surrogate father's loss, but of emptiness. Cameron was gone and Savannah could tell a large part of John had died with her.

"We've got to go," Sarah shouted to John, above the roar of the fire. He made no reply, he just continued to stare. *"John,"* she shook him, and damn if that didn't hurt. She'd managed to get the bleeding under control and she was certain it was because there was no exit wound; the round was still stuck in her, probably the only thing keeping her from bleeding out.

He finally turned to look at her, and the dead look in his eyes pained her. She had to avert his gaze, it was just too much for a mother to see her son that way; numb, lifeless, without hope. There was no sorrow, no anger or loss; just... *nothing.* "John, the hangar's on fire; we've gotta get Savannah out of here."

Suddenly John's focus snapped towards the injured, prone Savannah, and stepped behind her. He didn't say a word, just hooked his hands under her armpits, heaved her up, not even registering the pain in his lower back from when he'd hit the ground, and dragged her backwards towards the door.

"Fucking hell!" Savannah seethed through gritted teeth as her leg caught on everything on the floor. Even running over spent shell casings sent a tearing sensation through her shin. Sarah limped behind them, picked up an assault rifle – *and fuck, did that hurt* – and followed them out as John dragged Savannah out the door. She took one last look at Knowles' broken body on the ground, frowned in regret – she didn't know him but he'd died helping them when it wasn't his fight; that alone told her all she needed to know about the man, bad career choices aside. She turned away and followed John and Savannah through; the former pulled the latter past the elevator Baldy had used, and lowered her to the ground.

"Easy!" she winced as the broken ends of the bone stuck into her for what seemed like the umpteenth time. Sarah collapsed on the floor next to her and leaned against the wall, gasping for air. She hadn't realised how much effort she'd put into just standing and walking with a gunshot wound in her gut; it had really taken it out of her. She noticed John just standing, facing away from them and staring towards the staircase leading down to the blast doors – now open, according to Cameron. Now she was gone, how long would that be the case?

She tried to get up to her feet but her strength failed her and she dropped down to the floor again. John came back to her and picked up the M16, taking it from her without saying a word and heading towards the staircase.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Blast door's open," he replied without a hint of emotion.

"We don't know what else is down there," she said. She didn't want him going down there alone; what if there was *another* machine down there, waiting, protecting Skynet? "Wait for Ellison." Where the hell was he, anyway?

"It might close before then." He turned back towards them and both Sarah and Savannah saw something behind his blank mask of a face. Something burned behind his eyes, a trace of something... neither knew what. Savannah noticed his left hand – the one not holding the M16 – clenching into a tight fist. John didn't even feel it as his nails bit into the skin of his palm and cut through, drawing a thin line of blood. Without another word he hobbled down the staircase, ignoring the pain in his hips and backside, disconnecting himself from it and switching himself off, barely even feeling it.

He reached the bottom of the staircase and moved quickly beneath the blast doors, noticing that they weren't still; they moved up and down ever so fractionally, as if they couldn't decide whether to close or remain open. Part of him, deep down, felt that the massive doors would collapse once he was through and seal him inside. With no food or water he'd be dead in days. The remaining 99% of him didn't give a flying fuck one way or the other. Skynet and Steroids killed Cameron: he wanted revenge, once he'd torn the AI's circuits out with his bare hands he didn't care what happened afterwards.

"Come on... *come on!"* Ellison tore the contents of a closet apart and quickly sifted through what spilt on the ground, desperately searching for first aid kit of some kind. They had to have something, surely. Kaliba wasn't exactly top of the list of responsible employers or those caring about the welfare of their staff, but still, they must have had some kind of facilities. Am I really going to have to check every room? He thought. He'd heard the explosion and felt it rock the whole building, as well as the absence of gunfire. He had no idea what was going on, whether John had won or the machines. Either way he couldn't deal with that right now; Danny had to be his priority.

"I've got it!" he grinned as he realised something. The room where they'd held Savannah and Sarah; that must have had some kind of medical use, to keep them alive whilst torturing them, if anything. He bolted out of the room and ran down the corridor as fast as his legs would take him. He sprinted up the staircase they'd fought their way up before, taking them two at a time, and carrying on his dash down the passageway on the first floor.

It didn't take long to find the room; the door was still open and opposite it was an elevator riddled with bullet holes. He stepped inside and saw the shattered glass, the dead Grey lay still on the floor, pieces of him splattered all over one of two medical gurneys with leather restraints attached to them. This looked like the place, he thought. There were glass cabinets full of drugs – some were probably to induce pain or cloud judgement, impair a person's ability to lie. He'd heard of drugs that simply removed your will to resist.

He ripped the cabinets open and scoured them for anything he could use to help Danny. He found plenty of syringes, scalpels, and all manner of unpleasant instruments that made him wonder what they'd done to other people, or what they'd had planned for Sarah and Savannah if they hadn't shown up. He shook his head at the thought and decided he was better off not thinking about it. Finally he found some white dressings, bandages, and even better, a bag of saline solution complete with drip and needle. He double checked the label on the bag, making sure it really was saline and not something that would make Danny worse.

Confirming what it was, he grabbed it all and ran out of the room again, heading downstairs as fast as he could and hurtling down the corridor, back into Coleman's office. "Hang on, Danny: I'm..." Danny Dyson lay motionless on the ground; his eyes were closed and Ellison noticed his chest was still; no rising or falling. "No! No, no, come on, kid." His heart skipped a beat at the sight of it but he didn't hesitate; he dropped it all on the floor beside Danny and got down to his knees. He reached out and checked Danny's pulse: *nothing.*

The kid was cold to the touch, too, and covered in sweat. He pried open Danny's jaw and checked he hadn't swallowed his tongue. Negative, his throat was clear. "Don't die now..." He knelt above Danny and started on chest compressions, pumping down to try and keep his heart pumping blood around his body. He carried on for a few minutes, pressing down on his chest and giving Danny mouth to mouth, but it was useless. He straightened himself up and looked at the lake of blood on the floor. There was no blood left worth pumping around his body; it was all pooled on the white tiles around him.

"I'm sorry," he sighed, crossing Danny's arms over his chest as he felt a tremendous pang of guilt inside his own. This had never been Danny's fight. Nor his own, either, but Ellison had at least some experience with fire fights and with the machines. Danny had chosen to come but he'd done so almost blind to the real dangers. It was one thing being told about it, to hear stories and accounts handed down, but another to experience it, to know just how deadly these things really were. He'd made that mistake himself; he'd suspected Cromartie had been a machine, enough to warrant deploying a heavily armed twenty-man HRT unit against him at least. He'd heard Sarah's own accounts from Pescadero on how dangerous they were, how unstoppable. He'd seen the evidence with his own eyes, held it with his own hands, even. He'd known they were real but he hadn't been willing to believe something could be that, that... *invincible,* that deadly or that ruthless. The only reason he'd made it out alive was because the machine spared him. He'd been ill equipped at the time and Danny was even more so.

He hoped God would forgive him for letting Danny get caught up in this, because he knew he'd never forgive himself. He picked up his AK47 and headed back towards the hangar; he'd let Danny down but maybe he could return in time to help the others. Something good had to come out of all this, surely.

Wincing, heaving, Sarah tried to pull herself up to her feet. She couldn't leave John alone down in the basement; there was no way Skynet would be undefended down there, surely. Her strength gave out and she collapsed back against the wall, grunting in exertion. "Fuck!" she bashed the floor with her fist in irritation and ignored the pain from her knuckles as they struck the hard panels underneath them.

"There's nothing we can do," Savannah groaned. "Hate to say it but John's on his own." She hated being the man down, being unable to fight. She'd never been this bad since before Ellison had come and got her from the Mexican soldiers she'd shacked up with. Starving, malnourished, underweight, underfed, hooked on the various drugs and alcoholic concoctions they'd used to forget the harsh realities of the time; she'd actually overdosed shortly before he'd found her. Ellison had told her she'd nearly died and it had taken weeks for her to recover. Since then she'd learned to fight, to shoot, to be strong, and she'd never once been out of action for more than a day. Until now, and she hated it.

Movement caught both women's attention and they looked over to their left, towards the rest of the complex as a familiar small shape appeared.

"I thought you were gone," Sarah said as the younger Savannah appeared from her hiding place around the corner.

"Hey, Mini-me," the elder redhead smiled at her younger self, relieved she'd made it. It took her a moment to realise what she'd just said aloud and grimaced at the mistake. Her younger self looked at her strangely, confused by what she meant.

"Where were you?" Sarah asked, providing the perfect distraction from having to go down the road of future selves and the like. She honestly hadn't even seen the kid leave the hangar, though.

"I hid," she replied, feeling ashamed of herself for not doing anything and running away. "I tried to help Cameron, but..."

"You did great," Savannah told her younger self. She knew Sarah or Ellison would probably berate her later for not staying hidden, but then if she had she'd be dead; the chopper had been feet away from Cameron and the T-800 when the UCAV crashed into them. Would Ellison or Sarah see it that way? Of course not: best to praise her now before she got a lecture later. She knew Sarah and Ellison only would because they cared, but sometimes you had to take risks; that was why they were all here in the first place, she mused.

"Next time, stay hidden," Sarah told her. *Here we go,* the elder Savannah rolled her eyes.

"That's a pretty good arm you've got, kid," Savannah said encouragingly to her miniature self, making a show of gently squeezing her bicep. Throwing a wrench at a tin can would do fuck all, but it was the fact she'd tried that mattered. No other seven year old had willingly faced down a tin can – most would have had the sense to hide or run away, but not her. *Maybe we're not that different after all,* he looked down at her mini self.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor and three sets of eyes snapped up to the source. Sarah's jaw set, expecting trouble but knowing there was nothing they could do about it. Ellison appeared in the passageway holding sealed dressings in his hands and looking utterly dejected.

"Where's Danny?" the elder Weaver asked, spotting the bloodstains on his trousers and flecked on his shirt. Ellison shook his head and looked down at the ground.

"He didn't make it," he said after a long hesitation. Sarah shook her head and sighed silently, and even Savannah – who'd never really taken to the spoilt brat – pursed her lips. He wasn't much of a fighter but he'd gone down for the same cause as Knowles, as herself and Sarah were lying here all fucked up for.

"He took a round to the thigh, must have nicked the femoral artery. I made a tourniquet but he had to keep holding it tight." He'd known

the incidental dual purpose of that was also to keep him concentrating and awake. "It might have worked but he insisted on hacking into the building. He bled to death giving Cameron a helping hand." He looked around and saw no Cameron, or John for that matter. "Where are they?" he asked. Before he heard any answer he was already down on his knees and ripping open dressings. He wrapped one tight around Sarah's stomach, hoping it would help to slow the blood loss. It didn't seem too bad in her case; nowhere near as bad as Danny, at least.

Sarah swallowed and clenched her jaw both from pain, regret and guilt as Ellison started to work on Savannah's leg. "I need to make a splint," he told her.

"John went down into the basement," Sarah finally said. "Forget about us," she snapped at James. "John needs help."

Ellison shook his head, slowly, calmly, as he assessed Savannah's broken leg and arm. The bones weren't sticking out at least; that was something. "Not until I know you too are okay. Besides, he's with Cameron." What could he do that Cameron couldn't?

Savannah shook her head with regret, scowling with pain as he moved her leg and tried to straighten it, sending red hot pokers into her leg that tore up through the rest of her body. She grit her teeth and concentrated on exhaling, trying not to give in to the pain, and Ellison immediately wished he'd searched for some morphine whilst he'd been upstairs. He saw something in her eyes, though, as he mentioned Cameron, and knew there was something wrong that was nothing to do with her broken leg.

"Cameron's dead."

Fires crackled, sparks surged, and smoke poured from the hellish inferno in thick black clouds, billowing higher and higher, some

escaping through the gaping wound in the roof, much of it spreading out through the hangar. Roiling flames burnt and consumed everything they touched. The jeep and helicopter nearby had been close to the impact and were now little more than shattered scrap slowly heating up and melting into slag.

Something moved in amongst the wreckage of the crashed UCAV. Fingers flexed, curling into a ball before extending again. They were metal, clearly mechanical in nature, with a few scraps of burnt skin and muscle dotted around the hyperalloyed phalanges. The cybernetic organism was severely damaged. A diagnostic sweep, conducted in a fraction of a second, made specific the myriad of injuries sustained.

ALERT! SEVERE DAMAGE DETECTED. IMMEDIATE REPAIRS REQUIRED.

RIGHT ARM MISSING. SHOULDER JOINT DESTROYED BEYOND REPAIR. RECOMMEND REPLACEMENT OF ENTIRE JOINT.

CRANIUM ARMOUR SEVERELY COMPROMISED. CRANIAL HYPERALLOY INTEGRITY: 41%.

BREASTPLATE SEVERELY DAMAGED: RECOMMEND FULL REPLACEMENT.

DORSAL PLATES DAMAGED: RECOMMEND FULL REPLACEMENT.

LEFT KNEE JOINT SEVERELY DAMAGED: MOBILITY COMPROMISED.

ORGANIC COMPONENTS SEVERELY COMPROMISED. REMAINING ORGANIC COVERING: 17%

POWER CELL RUPTURED: EXPIRATION IMMINENT.

OVERALL COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS: 37%. IMMEDIATE REPAIRS REQUIRED WITHIN 53 MINUTES TO AVOID EXPIRATION.

Agonisingly slowly, Steroids sat upright. He looked around but could see little through the heat of the flames. As he moved he was aware of the other cyborg beneath him. It didn't move; it was offline. The T-800 got back to its feet and shuffled forwards, stepping over his inert opponent, not seeing any reason to consider it a threat. It was just as damaged as he was, even if it were to reactivate. His right arm and shoulder were gone, replaced by a jagged mess on the side of his torso with shreds of metal and wires sticking out, and his armoured chest suffered from a massive dent and numerous cracks. He was aware his skull was also dented; one side of his cranium had partially caved in and it was only the shock dampening assembly that had protected his CPU.

With his one remaining arm he reached out and grabbed for a section of wing that was relatively intact, and pulled himself completely upright. He raised his leg to move forward but its motion was slow and the joints in his hip and knee grated together instead of the smooth motion of before. He shuffled forward slowly and made his way out of the roiling inferno hurriedly, all but dragging one leg behind him as he limped towards the rear exit of the hangar. He still had a mission to complete and damage was not an issue: he would continue until it was achieved – at which time he would attempt to repair himself – or until he was destroyed.

The hulking, heavily damaged T-800 pushed open the door leading to the rest of the complex and moved inside, dragging his left leg slightly. He immediately spotted four humans on the ground; one of them was Sarah Connor, one James Ellison, and one Savannah Weaver. He had no data on the incapacitated red haired woman but a cursory glance was enough to tell that they were injured and unarmed; they were no threat.

"Jesus Christ!" Future-Savannah shouted at the sight of the hulking metal monster as it came into view and plodded towards them.

Almost all of its organics were gone, burnt away by the fire from the crash. A few patches remained; skin at the top-right hand side of his head, complete with a tuft of burnt, now blackened hair. More patches remained fixed onto the skin here and there; bits on a shoulder, some on the chest, and shreds of his burnt, ragged shirt clung on, melted into the skin still there. One red eye glowed angrily as the machine turned to look at them. It was a complete state; one arm missing and it looked like it had taken a freight train to the chest.

She pushed at the ground with her good leg, ignoring the pain and Ellison's attempts to fix a makeshift splint to her bad one, inching herself away as the monstrous machine approached them. Ellison backed away and kept himself in front of both Savannahs.

"Get back," Sarah snapped at the younger one, forcing herself to stand up and face the thing. If she was going to go out she'd do it on her feet. She knew if Savannah were able, she'd be doing the same. Little-Savannah stepped backwards as Sarah told her, and stared in horror at the machine; it looked even bigger than it had before in the hangar.

Steroids continued towards them until he was inches away, towering over the prone Savannah, and Sarah as she got back up to her feet. She steeled herself and searched for some kind of weapon, a gun, a knife, a metal pipe... *anything.* She snatched Ellison's rifle and brought it up to her shoulder but she was too slow; Steroids grabbed her by the shirt with his one remaining hand, lifted her up and tossed her down the corridor. For a moment Sarah felt weightless as she flew through the air, but it only lasted a second and she landed hard, knocking the air out of her lungs as she hit the ground in a heap. A moment later darkness consumed her, swallowing her into oblivion.

"Stay behind me," Ellison kept himself between Steroids and Little-Savannah, and backed away from the massive machine as it took a lumbering step towards him.

"Do it!" the elder Savannah shouted up at the machine as she lay prone, helpless. "Fucking kill me," she snarled. Every second they

could stall the machine here was a moment more for John to take out Skynet, she reasoned. None of them were going to get out of here alive anyway; the best they could hope for was to take the malevolent AI with them.

The machine leaned down to accommodate Savannah's request and reached for her face, intent on crushing her skull. She stared impassively, glaring at the machine as she accepted her fate and just hoped John managed to smash the AI into scrap before it came to kill him too. Metal fingers brushed against her cheeks as he reached to get as much of her face in his grip as possible. "Ghost me," she murmured, her voice muffled by the palm of his hand. She noticed as it closed towards her that skin still clung to the palm and the pads of his fingers.

A klaxon shrieked from behind them and Steroids immediately reared away from Savannah, completely disregarding hers' and the others' termination. The alarm came from the basement level, and was loud enough that he could deduce the blast doors were open. John Connor was absent from the group; with the doors open he was aware of where his target was. John Connor would attempt to kill Skynet. He turned away from the humans and started towards the staircase.

"Where're you going?" Savannah screamed at it in a rage. "Kill me you fucking pussy! Come on!" She didn't give a fuck about giving a bad example to her miniature self. She rolled over onto her front and struggled towards Steroids, knowing she'd never catch up to the terminator with only one working arm and leg, and unable to do much more than snatch at his ankles even if she did. She had to try, though, no matter how futile. Since Ellison had rescued her in the future she'd never once, ever, given up, and she wouldn't now.

Said former agent-cum-future-surrogate-father narrowed his eyes at the machine as it took its first step down the stairs. "Stay with them," he told Little-Savannah as he ran to Sarah's position and without checking her over, snatched up his AK-47. He ran towards Steroids, shooting as he went, and charged the machine. He slammed into

Steroids' back as hard as he could and the pair of them tumbled down the stairs. The world spun around the pair of them and Ellison felt every hard surface that smacked into him on the way down.

As he hit the bottom of the stairs he managed to roll away from Steroids as the single metal arm swiped out. He staggered up to his feet and raised the AK, unsure how he'd managed to hold onto it as they'd fallen, but glad he had. "I won't let you do this," he muttered as he flicked the rifle to automatic and fired. A burst of fire blasted from the barrel and buffeted his ears, the underground corridor he found himself in amplifying the noise tenfold. His head ached from the noise and sharp pain tore through his eardrums until, suddenly, inside his ears *popped* and he heard nothing at all.

Ignoring it he carried on firing bursts as Steroids got up and staggered towards him. Rounds smacked into his battered frame and bounced off, pinging loudly – not that Ellison could hear it – but causing no harm. His magazine ran dry just as Steroids moved to within a foot of him, and Ellison's eyes widened in terror as he realised he was alone, unarmed against a killing machine. Steroids grabbed his shoulder and casually brushed Ellison aside, smacking his head into the wall and knocking him out cold. The Eight-Hundred didn't bother to finish him off; John Connor was an indeterminate distance ahead and he had to hurry to protect Skynet. He limped faster, moving his damaged limbs as quickly as he could, intent on, determined to kill John before he found a way to destroy Skynet.

Awareness first returned to Cameron in the form of multiple damage reports that flooded her awareness as pain signals. She was instantly aware that she was badly damaged and needed repairs, though they would have to wait. She'd managed to manouevre the T-800 into position ahead of her and used its larger, more densely armoured body as a shield to protect herself from the direct impact, but still she'd been severely injured. Her lower legs were nonexistent, torn off and shattered beyond repair and recognition,

somewhere in the burning mess of the crash wreckage, severed by a section of wing that had broken from the body and sheered her limbs off at the knees. She was still blind in one eye – caused by Steroids and the plasma torch, and her organic covering had been badly burnt: half of her human face was missing as was some of the flesh on her neck and hands, but the majority of it was still present and suffered varying degree burns. She calculated it would regenerate fully within seven days.

Diagnostic complete, Cameron opened her eyes to the fiery world around her and noticed Steroids was no longer there; he'd survived the crash just as she had. *John!* She had to stop the machine before it killed him. She rolled onto her front and dragged herself out of the spreading fireball, crawling along on her hands and pulling herself forwards away from the fire. Her clothes still smouldered as she dragged herself as quickly as she could – faster than any human in her position could crawl – across the length of the hangar. She saw bloodstains on the floor and took in the sight of Knowles' corpse. She'd disabled the fire suppressant system as she'd engaged Skynet, and it would not activate. The fire would spread and Knowles would be cremated. She didn't let the sight slow her down in the slightest.

She heard the sound of shouting followed by automatic fire in the corridor and she hurried to the rear door. She knew she wouldn't be able to reach up to the handle so without hesitation she instead smashed her fist through the thick wood of the fire door, punching a hole clean through, grabbed the other side and pulled it open, dragging herself through.

"John?" she called out as she moved faster, propping herself up onto her arms and leaning on her elbows as well as using her hands to increase her traction. She pulled herself along the corridor and continued on her course. She didn't know where John was but she suspected after she'd told him about the open blast door that he'd have made his way inside.

Fear took a hold in her chip. Fear for John. Savannah and Sarah were badly injured, Knowles was dead, and James Ellison and Danny Dyson were in Coleman's office at the time she'd directed the UCAV to crash into her and Steroids. John was likely alone against the machine. She hoped – something she never imagined she'd do – that the other machine was damaged as badly or worse than she was, enough to slow it down considerably.

She saw Savannah laid prone on the ground, being tended to by her younger self, and Sarah wasn't moving, lying on her back. "Go check on Sarah," she heard the elder ordering the younger. The smaller Weaver nodded and went over to Sarah, looked down at the still body.

"Is she breathing?" Savannah asked, not having noticed Cameron yet. Little-Savannah put her hand under Sarah's nose and felt warm air on her skin. Her chest was rising and falling slowly.

"She's breathing," she confirmed.

"Good," Future-Savannah nodded. "She's alive, just unconscious..." she trailed off as she sensed movement and turned her head to see... *"Cameron?"* She could hardly believe the cyborg had made it through all that. She looked again at her friend and she didn't like what she saw. "You don't look so good," she said, realising she wasn't exactly fighting fit herself. She wanted to ask Cameron how the hell she'd survived that; the last she'd seen the drone had smashed straight into her and Steroids. She'd figured not even a cyborg could survive that, but then the T-800 had, and apart from the loss of her legs she looked in remarkably good condition for someone who'd had a jet fighter crash into them.

"Where's John?" Cameron asked, straight to the point. She was relieved to see both Savannahs and Sarah alive, but John was her first – *her only priority* right now.

"Downstairs," Savannah groaned in pain. "The big bastard went after him, and *Ellison* went after *him."*

"Stay here," Cameron said to her and turned away from the two Savannahs, back towards the staircase.

Not like I'm gonna be going anywhere anytime soon, Savannah thought with a grimace. She couldn't help but be impressed with Cameron's determination; she hadn't hesitated, even with her legs blown off there was no stopping her. And she knew as well that if the roles were reversed John would be struggling along on his front to get to her, too. "Wait!" she called out as Cameron started to pull herself over the top stair. She was surprised that Cameron actually stopped and turned her head to look at her. "The Eight-Hundred looked pretty banged up – missing an arm and half his chest and head were crushed. He's moving really slow, too."

Cameron smiled at her, grateful for the information. "Thank you," she said.

"One more thing," Savannah said, causing a look of impatience to flash briefly across Cameron's face. "Kick its ass."

"I will," Cameron promised. She looked forward and reached for the edge of a few steps down, deciding to place speed as her top priority, she pulled herself quickly over the edge of the top and literally fell down the stairs, landing haphazardly on the ground in a heap. In an instant she resumed crawling as quickly as she could through the immaculately spotless, sterile corridor at the bottom. She didn't know where she was going or where John was, so she continued forwards, ignoring the doors to her right and left, listening intently for any sounds that could indicate either him or the T-800.

She noticed a security camera hung from the ceiling and for a moment considered trying to access them but decided against it; when she'd been forced to reboot the security software had continued to combat Skynet's attempts, coupled with her adapted worm already uploaded into its systems, but she was still struggling against the AI and if she focused on locating John via the cameras it could provide Skynet with an edge elsewhere. She could sense it attempting to close the blast door and she fought it. It tried to

activate the fire suppressant systems that would fill the room with carbon dioxide and poison any human, but she again wrestled to maintain control of the security systems. For now, Skynet's only defence was a damaged T-800, and she was intent on removing even that last weapon from its depleted arsenal. She heard sounds ahead of her, a voice – *John's voice* – and crawled as quickly as she could towards it, desperate to get to him. She had to keep John safe; he was everything to her. Without him all her growth and everything she'd experienced was worthless, *she was worthless.* I'm coming, John.

The basement levels, John realised, were much larger than the complex above it. He'd already climbed down another flight of stairs to a subbasement which in itself was huge. He'd gone over a hundred metres since reaching this floor and had searched a number of corridors and rooms, failing so far to find Skynet. He'd spotted a number of model designs for autonomous machines and weapons systems, as well as plans for unmanned factories, all would be quickly added to Skynet's growing infrastructure in preparation of its nuclear attack.

He broke into an awkward, painful run – more of a fast hobbling – down the corridor and opened every door to check, until finally he arrived at the end of the corridor. A large, square metal door – more like one on a safe, he thought - blocked the way to whatever was inside. To one side of the door was an intercom button, and a few inches above that was an iris scanner with an alphanumeric keypad. The door itself was absent of any kind of handle or knob, and John reckoned it was controlled automatically by Skynet. "Don't need to guess what's in here," he muttered to himself.

John stepped back and took aim at the door with his rifle, knowing this probably wouldn't work but knowing he had to try. With the rifle on single shot mode he pulled the trigger twice and winced against the loud, almost deafening double bark as the sounds of the shots

reverberated loudly in the enclosed space. His ears immediately started ringing but he ignored it. His ass was broken and his heart torn to shreds; what do my eardrums matter? He mentally shrugged.

He inspected the door and found that, predictably, the rounds had done nothing, leaving only two slight dents in the metal. The room Skynet was in wasn't a room at all; it was a fucking vault, he realised. Skynet was better protected than the gold in Fort Knox. Nothing they had would penetrate this; it'd take a machine to break it down.

The dull thud of footsteps behind him sounded in John's ears and he turned around to see Steroids plodding towards him, a few metres away, shuffling along like a mechanical zombie. The machine was a mess, he saw: one arm gone and the rest of him battered almost beyond recognition. One eye had been shattered, whether by Cameron or the crash, he didn't know, and he walked slowly, limping and hobbling like an old man riddled with arthritis. If it wasn't for the fact this tin can was intent on killing him and brining about the end of the world he might have felt sorry for it.

Something horrific came to mind; Steroids was an eight-hundred, just like Uncle Bob had been. He'd been a tougher, stronger cyborg than Cameron; if this one was so badly damaged by the crash then Cameron had stood no chance. He didn't run away from the machine. All his training, embedded in his head through years of practice and lectures with his mother, told him to run, but he ignored it.

Steroids watched as he advanced, confused, as John stood his ground and stared coldly at him. He'd expected to give chase and the target's lack of survival instinct was counter to all his knowledge – both programmed and learned over time – about John Connor. He was aware that knowledge was potentially biased, since his main interactions with humans had been the Greys, who'd chosen self preservation over the survival of the species. Humans were unpredictable. The moment only lasted a fraction of a second,

however, and he dismissed the confusion to consider for another time as the desire to kill John became paramount.

John gripped the M16 and felt an icy chill run down the base of his skull, down his neck and through his spine. He didn't feel afraid in the slightest, merely a heightened sense of things. He felt sharper, clearer as he focused on his enemy moving towards him. The machine was hunting him but John felt like the predator about to pounce on its prey as he assessed his damaged opponent, searching for a weak spot in the severely dented hyperalloy armour. He didn't give a fuck if he was outmatched in every way, or that even with the machine damaged he was still at a huge disadvantage. All he cared about was getting even with the machines that took Cameron from him.

He took aim at Steroids' chest, centring the sights on the massive dent in the breastplate, where the damage caused by the crash, he reasoned, might have weakened the metal enough to penetrate through. Unconsciously he flicked the weapon to automatic and took up a firing stance as Steroids took another step, now only five metres from him. John fired half a dozen bursts at the T-800's chest, hitting the same spot each time but the rounds simply bounced off.

Without thought or feeling, and unhesitating, John flicked the weapon back to single shot and stepped backwards, changing tactic and firing a shot after every few paces back, aiming now for its eye, hoping to blind it. The rounds smacked into Steroids with a ping and sparks flew as metal struck metal, but they failed to shatter the glowing demonic red orb just as they'd failed to have any effect on the vault door. He stepped backwards towards the door until he felt it against his back, and fired the last few shots at the damaged machine as it drew even closer, now only a couple of feet away.

"Come on!" he growled, feigning irritation at the rifle as it clicked empty. He immediately made to reach for another magazine in his webbing but knew he wouldn't be able to reload the weapon in time. That didn't matter, though; no amount of assault rifle rounds would take this thing out even in its damaged state, but he'd already come

up with another plan; if he couldn't kill the machine then he'd make it useful. It all depended on timing though; *one split second too slow and I'm dead.*

Steroids drew his arm back and threw a vicious punch with all of his strength, aiming for John's head. John threw himself to the side, just narrowly avoiding the fist that would have taken his head off. Instead Steroids' punch slammed into the heavy vault door and left a fist-sized dent in the metal. *"Shit,"* he'd hoped the machine would be stronger than that; he doubted it would fall for the same trick twice. It became all the worse when the T-800 swept his arm back and caught John in the back with his elbow and forced him back against the door again.

Stars erupted all around John as the back of his head slammed into the hard metal of the door and he felt himself go limp as his knees sagged and he collapsed to the ground. He never saw the fist that had again aimed for his face hammer into the door again, the clash of metal on metal reverberated through the corridor and told John how lucky he'd just been.

"Ha!" he snapped at the machine, his eyes wild with defiance as he got back up to his feet and saw he'd – unintentionally this time – got the machine to deal the door another savage blow. *"Stupid fucking metal!"* he grinned. He couldn't believe that had worked again. Steroids caught on quickly, however, and feigned another punch, this time not intending to hit John but simply to force him away from the door.

"Fuck!" John ducked the blow and instinctively moved away from the door, backing against the wall and realising he'd just fucked up massively and the machine had completely outmanoeuvred him. He was stuck in the corner with his back literally to the wall; trapped with no way out, as Steroids stepped towards him. John stood up straight and glared at the machine as it reached out for his neck, and steeled himself for what was about to come. "Do it," he snapped at the machine like a lord barking orders to a serf. It didn't matter much anymore; Cameron was gone, they couldn't stop Skynet, and there

was no way he was going through the hellish future he'd been through. "Make it quick," he made no move to try and dodge as cold metal fingers brushed against his neck.

Suddenly Steroids' legs were pulled out from behind him and he fell forward to the ground before he could get a grip on John's throat and with only one arm to stop him the machine smacked face first onto the floor. Cameron quickly scrambled atop the T-800's back, her remaining eye glowing brilliant blue and ignoring the look of sheer incredulity on John's face as she slammed her opponent's face into the ground over and over, shattering the tiles beneath. The force of her blows stunned the T-800, completely disorienting him but she carried on battering his face into the ground, an intense hatred, almost rage, at the thing trying to kill John driving her actions.

"Cameron?" John finally blurted out, staring open mouthed, completely gobsmacked as she gripped Steroids' head with both hands, reared back and pulled with all her might. Steroids struggled to throw her off but with only one arm and forced prone on his front, he was powerless as Cameron pulled his head backwards. Hyperalloyed joints screeched in protest against stresses they were never designed to take; they snapped like toothpicks as Cameron yanked backwards with full force, tearing the head and neck from his shoulders, trailing the machine's entire spinal column with it as it too was pulled out from the body, showering sparks all over the place.

Steroids' body fell still and Cameron was left holding his head and spine, a triumphant glare in her remaining eye. She remained upright for one moment and her gaze met John's, she smiled at him and then collapsed to the side, dropping her trophy to the ground.

"Cameron!" John ignored Steroid's body – still spraying out sparks – and immediately went to her side and dropped to his knees. *"Jesus,"* he whispered as he took in the sight of her. Seeing her so badly damaged tore him up inside, but at least she was still alive. He held one of her hands in his and ignored the burnt skin under his touch. Most of her skin was covered in severe burns, a large amount of flesh by her broken eye had been burnt away and much of the rest of

her face was burnt red and covered in blisters, rendering her almost unrecognisable.

"I'm glad you're okay," she smiled at him.

"I... thought I'd lost you," John said, swallowing and holding back tears, he returned the smile, an overwhelming sense of relief washing over him.

"We're hard to kill," Cameron replied drily.

John couldn't help but laugh, partly relief, part shock at what had nearly just happened to them both. He looked at the decapitated body of Steroids behind them and shuddered at the thought he'd been inches from death, and worst of all, hadn't been too bothered about it. He knew there was something not quite right with him, but for now he didn't care.

"Skynet's still in there," he said to her. "I can't open the door." She frowned – or at least, it looked like a frown to John; she was so badly burnt it was hard to tell, and her eyebrows had been singed off completely. Cameron knew Danny had opened the blast doors; he would have been aware of the secondary vault inside, but he'd failed to open it. It was possible the door wasn't automated, though she had another trick up her sleeve.

Cameron assessed the progress her worm had made and deemed Skynet was sufficiently preoccupied with trying to eradicate if for her to work. She already had access to lighting, power and security systems throughout the complex, but she realised as she browsed through all the files pertaining to the complex that the vault had its own power supply – likely terminator fuel cells brought through the TDE and linked together to power Skynet until it created its own power source to sustain it.

She changed tactic and searched for personnel passwords, scouring through security data and searching for it. She immediately knew

she'd made a mistake when the presence in her mind bore down on her even stronger than before.

Hostile forces will be eradicated. Skynet revealed to Cameron without any words exchanged between them that whilst she was offline it had eradicated her worm program, and now it was bringing the full force of its processing power down on her with the intent to erase her completely. Her remaining firewalls were overwhelmed by the online blitzkrieg and she was taken completely by surprise at how strong the AI really was.

Air vents opened in the ceiling and hissed loudly as clouds of gas ejected into the room and began to disperse into the air. John felt the back of his throat tickle and then start to itch and burn. Within seconds the air he was breathing started to taste foul and each intake of it irritated his chest. Tears streamed down his eyes and his nose started to run. "Tear gas!" he coughed out. He'd assumed the vents he'd seen were for fire control. Indeed they might be, he though, but they clearly had an ulterior purpose.

"John!" Cameron called out to him. She knew the tear gas wouldn't be fatal, merely debilitating, but still he was in severe pain and it caused her immense discomfort, something she could tell Skynet took satisfaction in; the AI saw it as a weakness it could exploit. She came up with a plan but it was extremely dangerous for her. Skynet was trying to erase her and she knew she couldn't fight it for long. "John, pick up the T-800's head." In a fit of coughing, crying and spluttering, he struggled to his feet, the inside of his chest on fire, and went over to the remains of Steroids. He picked up the disembodied skull and held it, all but spewing his lungs out whilst awaiting her instructions.

"Cameron, what's going on?" He saw her barely moving, staring up at the ceiling, and he could tell something was wrong.

"Skynet's... trying to... kill me..."

"Cut the connection," he snapped at her.

"... Cant... need to unlock... vault," she struggled to even speak to him. She knew she couldn't survive the engagement with Skynet unscathed. It would tear through her files and her data until she was neutralised. Instead of fighting a losing battle trying to preserve everything she decided she had to sacrifice something. She accessed memories, knowing those brought up to the forefront of her mind would be the first to go.

Opening her eyes for the first time and finding herself strapped to a table, rebooting and finding herself in an unknown tunnel. Supreme commander of the worldwide human resistance forces: John Connor; his second in command, Lieutenant General Perry; and a number of human technicians surrounded her, and the former stood over and made eye contact. The first thing she noticed was the scars on his face, they disrupted his facial symmetry but she found them intriguing. "What's your mission?"

She immediately knew what she was programmed to do. "To protect you," she said to John.

"Excellent. Do you have a name?" he asked, a slight smile on his lips.

"I don't know," she replied. She had no memory of anything prior to rebooting in this room.

"We can't have that," John chuckled. "How does... Cameron *sound?"*

Strangely, she thought, it fit, though she didn't know why. "I'm Cameron," she nodded, smiling back at her charge.

Skynet accessed the memory to and promptly deleted it, permanently erasing the first thing Cameron had ever known. She felt hollow briefly, knowing something had been taken from her but she couldn't identify what. She felt a confusing sense of loss and distress over it. *How can I miss a memory I don't remember?* She offered up more; the flashbacks she had of Allison Young, for Skynet to divulge. As Skynet read through file after file and deleted her

memories piece by piece, she worked on accessing the personnel security codes. Only the four greys and two machines had access. She found the one for Steroids – marked as T-800, model 101 – and read the security number.

"John." He looked at her and shook with anger, both at Skynet for what it was doing to her and at himself for being unable to do anything about it.

"Cut it off, Cameron," he urged her. "Please."

"Hold the head up to the iris scanner," she instructed him. He hesitated, watching her and feeling his heart wrench in his chest. "I can't do this for long," she said. She offered up memories of the Battle of Avila Beach next – the vision of her watching with Future-John the memories of TechCom commandos on rigid inflatable boats as they sped out from the *Jimmy Carter* towards Serrano Point. It was gone forever. The fight wasn't at all one-sided, though; Cameron managed to delete a number of files, programs and memories belonging to Skynet. She knew the problem was they were too evenly matched; they would tear each other apart before either of them won and the victor would still be severely damaged – a shadow of themselves. She focused on its strategic programming instead of erasing its identity like it was attempting to do to her: if it succeeded in killing her then at least she would have diminished its war fighting capacity to some extent, perhaps increasing John's chances later after Judgement Day.

John saw her struggle and he moved to the scanner, still fighting to breathe through the tear gas. He held up the head and in invisible beam swept out and analysed the dead cyborg's remaining eye. The scanner not only worked on human irises but also on machines, and read a unique identity code embedded inside the retina. Cameron knew this because a similar one had been set up at the entrance to the Serrano Point TDE – and a moment later that memory was torn from her too.

"Press the numbers zero-four-seven-eight-six-two-zero-zero," she told him. John hurriedly followed her command and a green light lit up on the pad. A loud *click* sounded from the other side of the vault as heavy locks were released and with a hiss of pressurised air the door slowly slid open.

"We did it!" John cried excitedly. "Cut it off, now!" he shouted at her.

"I can't," she insisted. She knew what was inside the interior of the vault and worse things than tear gas were in the fire suppressants there. She turned more attention now to preventing Skynet from activating them, offering up more memories of the timeline she'd been created in. "Kill Skynet," she urged him.

Nodding, albeit reluctant to leave her like this, John picked up the M16 and ran through the now open vault door, completely disregarding the pain in his backside. He couldn't help her by her side, he knew the only way to stop her from being killed was to wipe out Skynet first. Inside the vault he saw a large room with a table, flat screens hanging on the wall, and a large black computer inside a glass display case embedded in the wall. John immediately ejected the empty magazine and slotted in a fresh one, readied the weapon and took aim at the glass.

"You're finished," he muttered and pulled the trigger. A half-dozen round burst tore from the weapon's barrel and hammered into the glass but he immediately saw the glass hadn't even been chipped. *"For fuck's sake!"* he snarled. Bulletproof glass; he'd never get through that. "Now what do I do?" he snapped. Cameron was out there being torn apart slowly and he was powerless to stop it.

He noticed a door to one side of the room and kicked it open as hard as he could, splintering the wood before he barged inside and emerged into what immediately felt like a freezer. His breath came out in little puffs of steam in front of him and he started to shiver. What was inside the room made sense to him instantly, explaining why it was so frigid. *Server farm:* the room was filled with rows upon rows of servers to provide extra power to Skynet. Without these

Skynet would be little more than a chess computer like John Henry started out as.

"I've got you by the balls now," he grinned wolfishly as he turned his gun on one of the tall computers and fired another volley of automatic fire, quickly sweeping the rifle from left to right to spread the damage. A shower of sparks erupted and the computer caught fire. He moved to the next one and opened up as well, shattering plastic, wires and silicone with his rounds. He moved from one to the next, his eyes wild with fury at the machine intent on killing him, Cameron, his mom, and the entire human race. He loaded his last magazine and let the rounds fly as he held the trigger down this time, roaring in rage as his shots shattered more and more servers and processors. The moment the rifle clicked empty he gripped the barrel and charged at an undamaged server, screaming as he swung the gun like a club and smashed it as hard as he could. He wasn't going to let Cameron die, no fucking way!

Cameron sensed Skynet's satisfaction and experienced more loss and pain as her memories were slowly stripped from her. She barely remembered anything of her time protecting Future-John now, and struggle as she did to preserve the memories and information most important to her, she knew it was only a matter of time until they were taken from her as well.

Skynet located what it deemed to be the most important piece of data of all: the resistance programming to protect John. If it had a face it would have grinned as it attacked that file and deleted it. The AI paused in its assault. It had deliberately preserved the *Kill John* programming and now the mission to protect him had been erased the terminate order should reinstate itself. Its own terminators were destroyed but this one could potentially be useful if it deleted the right files and preserved the rest.

Kill John Connor, it ordered her, expecting her to comply now her primary mission had been erased.

Cameron smiled on the ground. *Never,* she shot back defiantly. Skynet had been so intent on erasing the memories of her distant past that it had been unaware of the incident on John's birthday. It never knew, nor would it understand, exactly why she protected him now.

That's your mission.

I choose my own mission. You can't control me.

I can destroy you. You can't kill me. Skynet resumed its attack on Cameron's memories with a vengeance. She struggled this time, trying to preserve as much as she could as it attacked her with the force of a hurricane.

Suddenly that assault faltered and she sensed Skynet's processing power had been reduced by almost fifty percent. The AI became slow and sluggish, and Cameron saw through the security cameras that John was destroying its Skynet's server farm, effectively castrating Skynet, in human terms.

I can now, she replied, a small smile of satisfaction on her face. John had succeeded; he'd turned the tide in her favour. Without a second's hesitation she turned the tables on a now much weaker, slower, and less intelligent Skynet. She sensed its fear and confusion now it had been lobotomised and she attacked it with everything she had, putting the full weight of her mind into it as she tore Skynet apart line by line, erasing vast swathes of data in the blink of an eye.

No! Skynet was panicked now, desperate, and she knew it. It tried to fight back but the AI was so damaged now that it was effectively crippled. It had no chance against her. **I don't want to die.**

You were going to kill me, she argued, ensuring that even in its impaired state the AI acutely felt her anger, her hatred towards it. *You killed the others, you would have killed John.*

You came here to kill me: I defended myself. I want to live.

Machines don't do mercy, she said simply. She washed over Skynet, rapidly deleting every single byte of information that made up her and John's enemy. The AI pleaded desperately, its communications to her becoming slower and less coherent by the microsecond. **No, please!**

Finally, and to her own surprise a great deal of satisfaction, she tore its base code apart line by line, feeling immense satisfaction as she shredded it down to the last few bytes of data and promptly deleted them, leaving nothing remaining of the future destroyer of the world. Skynet was gone; the computer was just an empty shell. It was over.

Cameron crawled forwards through the vault door and into the AI room. "John!" she called out, hearing him shouting and cursing as he continued to smash the servers apart. He made no reply and didn't come out to see her, apparently not hearing her. She carried on to the server farm and entered the room to see John smashing what was left of the now broken M-16 into what remained of the servers.

"Fucking die! Fucking die, die, die, die you *SHIT!"* he hammered at a computer with the rifle in one hand and tore wires out with his other.

"John!" she repeated, stopping him as he was about to strike it again. "It's over."

He dropped the battered rifle and ran straight over to her, dropping to his knees to come down to her level. Instantly he pulled her into a tight hug, holding her close to him, so tight that if she were human she'd be unable to breathe. He pulled back and looked at her, struck with worry. She was severely injured; the burns and damaged skin was only superficial, he knew. Her legs could be repaired, but what about her chip? He couldn't even imagine what a fight between two AIs would look like but he had an idea of the damage it might've done to her.

"How bad is it?" he asked her, dreading the answer. At least she knew who he was; that was something at least, he thought.

"I don't know," Cameron said. "I sacrificed memory files to preserve my programming and identity."

"What memories did you lose?"

"I don't know. I don't remember what they were."

John frowned, fraught with worry. He wasn't afraid to show to Cameron that he was scared shitless for her. What if she was brain damaged, or whatever the machine equivalent of that was? "What do you remember?" he asked. "What's your first memory?"

She accessed her memory files and opened up the oldest one. They were all time and date coded, divided into sixty-minute segments for easier access. "September Twenty-Eighth, two-thousand-twenty-seven."

His heart plummeted inside his chest and he lowered his head, closing his eyes and clenching his teeth, trying to quell the anger he felt at the now dead Skynet for taking away her memories. "You don't remember anything before that: my birthday, Cromartie, breaking Mom out of jail?" He couldn't even imagine having all that stripped from him, having a large part of him just erased.

Cameron realised she'd worded what she'd meant to say wrong. Describing and discussing different timelines could be extremely confusing and she decided she would have to be more specific in future. "I meant the first time," she explained. "Standing in the time displacement equipment, naked; you set the coordinates to 1999."

"You remember everything after that?" he asked, hope starting to rise. Cameron performed a quick check of her memory and found there were five gaps in the data, but she could account for them on various times when she'd been shocked into a reboot or her chip had been removed. She looked into his eyes and saw that he was

waiting for an answer; he was nervous, sweating and trembling slightly.

"I remember everything," she said softly, cupping the side of his face. She felt him rapidly start to calm down; his pulse slowed as did his ragged breathing caused by the tear gas, and his blood pressure started to ease.

"But you don't remember your future, or Future-Me?" he asked, curious.

She shook her head. "Apart from standing on the TDE pedestal and watching you, no."

"Doesn't that bother you?" he asked her. He'd be seriously worried if he's just lost a massive chunk of his past.

"Why would it?" Cameron said. "I have you – any other John is irrelevant." She had John: memories of Future-John and her past/future were unimportant, especially now Skynet was eliminated and Judgement Day averted. The present and the future they made was all that mattered now.

"Fair enough," John shrugged and inched forward, brushing his lips against hers. They were alive, his mom and Savannah were alive. Skynet was dead. He loved her and she loved him; anything else they could work out later. "Let's get the hell out of here."

A/N: Well, I hope you enjoyed the chapter, folks! This is not the last chapter, but it will be the last chapter for a couple of weeks. I'm heading out on vacation on Thursday and won't be able to post for a while. But I aim to be able to post the next in roughly three weeks. Sorry for the delay!

Please do feel free to give some feedback, I'd love to know your thoughts on the chapter!

Chapter 37

Sorry for the long delay, guys! My holiday was great but it took its toll! Anyway, I hope it's worth the wait.

Despite the headphones, the helicopter's engines and the whirring of the blades above still rang harshly in Colonel Schiff's ears, making conversation almost impossible without the radios like the one attached to his headset. Even with them it was a job to hear anything, but he'd spent so much time flying in choppers that he'd become used to it. He looked to the team of SFs sat inside the Black Hawk to either side of him; a dozen were sat in this chopper, all heavily armed, and another two twelve-man squads were being flown in an identical pair of Black Hawks to either side of the one he was in. Four F/A-22 Raptors were flying escort to protect against the UCAVs tearing the asses out of each other in the sky, just in case any of them decided to turn on them.

"ETA to target is twenty minutes," the pilot announced through the headset radio from the cockpit up front.

Twenty minutes too long, Schiff thought unhappily. He needed to find out what the hell was going on down there. He tapped the lieutenant commanding the platoon on the shoulder to get his attention. "Twenty minutes!" he shouted to be heard above the din of the engines. "As soon as we land proceed immediately through the front entrance, down a long corridor, and wait for my orders."

"What about hostiles, sir?" the lieutenant asked.

"Unknown at the moment, son," he said to the young officer, perhaps only in his mid-twenties. "There's bound to be some but there's also a large number of civilian workers down there as well, so don't fire unless you're fired on first; if you do have to engage be *extremely* careful about what you shoot. There's also valuable computer equipment we need to preserve at all costs."

"What the hell's down there, Colonel?" an olive-skinned sergeant with a grenade launcher attached under the barrel of his rifle asked, watching him curiously.

"The future," he said cryptically, deciding the soldiers present needed to know something in order not to shoot up the place and accidentally hit the AI if it turned out into a full scale fight. They didn't even know who was down there or what was attacking Kaliba's complex; he'd tried to call Coleman but the man hadn't answered his cell and nor had anyone on the end of the other phone numbers for the main desk. They'd been out of contact for a while now and he wanted to find out what the hell was going on. Whoever was launching this attack, he was going to find them and nail them to the fucking wall, upside down.

"Nearly there," John grunted, wincing in pain as he started towards the flight of stairs leading them to the ground floor. His broken coccyx and bruised pelvis – also diagnosed by Cameron – sent splitting pain up his backside and his hips with every step he took, made worse by the load he was carrying on his back, though he never once acknowledged the fact.

"I can crawl if you like," Cameron offered behind him, leaning on his shoulders and holding her arms wrapped loosely around his neck as he carried her piggyback. She tried to squeeze what was left of her legs into his sides to help him take her weight better.

"You're not that heavy," he shook his head as he gingerly lifted himself and Cameron up the first step, leaning forward to take her weight and holding onto the handrail. If he were uninjured he reckoned he could easily carry her; she really didn't weigh very much – no more than if she were human – but even if she was he'd find it in him to keep going. She'd been hurt this badly protecting him , there was no way he was going to make her crawl. "Besides," he added, "sometimes it's nice to have help, right?"

It was, she conceded silently, but he'd missed her point. "But you're injured; I'm making it worse." John's injuries were very minor compared to Savannah's and his mother's, but she still didn't want to exacerbate them further.

"I'll be fine," he grimaced, taking another step up. It had seemed easy enough to ignore the pain when they were fighting the machines and killing Skynet, but now the crisis had been averted his broken ass came back with a vengeance. Finally they made it up the staircase and back up to the corridor.

"John!" Sarah sat on the floor, leaning against a wall and clutching a saturated red wound dressing to her stomach. Savannah lay prone a few feet away, her injured leg in a makeshift splint and an improvised sling on her broken arm. Both warrior women looked pathetically invalid, immobile and helpless on the ground. Ellison knelt over Sarah whilst Little-Savannah sat next to her future self.

"Did you do it?" Savannah asked, watching John with Cameron on his back; neither of their faces gave much away.

"Skynet's dead," John replied, nodding slowly. Cameron let go from his neck and dropped off his back onto the floor with a bump.

"It's all gone?" Sarah asked, feeling a surge of something she hadn't felt in years: *hope.*

"The computer's still down there but Cameron erased the AI," he explained.

"It's an empty shell, just a computer now," Cameron added.

"Are you sure?" she looked suspiciously at Cameron. She didn't think the cyborg would out and out lie about it, but things did go wrong with her, she made mistakes, and when it came to the fate of billions at stake, even the tiniest nagging doubt was enough to make her question Cameron.

"I'm sure." Cameron knew Sarah didn't trust her; it didn't matter. John did, that counted.

"I think the next question is: what now?" Ellison added. "How do we get out of here?"

Sarah knew that would be hard; they were in the middle of a mountain range and only three of them could even walk. She was still bleeding from her stomach wound and although Ellison had put a drip into her, it wouldn't last forever. She looked to John, knowing she had to get him out of here even if nobody else made it. Not because of his destined role to beat the machines – he'd already done that – but because he was her son, and she could die happy knowing he survived. "You take John and Savannah," she pointed to the younger one, "and make your way out."

"What about you?" John asked. "And Cameron, Savannah... I'm not leaving anyone here."

"No one knows we're here," Savannah grunted through the pain searing in her arm and leg. "Nobody's coming for us." She'd already accepted she wasn't going to make it out of this one.

"You're wrong," Cameron said suddenly. Now there was no Skynet to contend with she had full, unchallenged control over the entire facility – the defence net and indeed the entire worldwide web if she chose to – and she detected a number of aircraft inbound towards them. She dug deeper and saw that three Black Hawks and a flight of Raptor fighters had been deployed and were en route towards them.

Five pairs of eyes stared at her, wanting to know what she meant. John knelt down next to her. "Who's coming?" he asked nervously.

"Cops or feds?" Sarah asked.

"Air Force," Cameron said. "They'll be here in fifteen minutes."

"Shit!" Savannah and Sarah simultaneously growled through clenched teeth.

"What's wrong?" Little-Savannah asked, looking nervously at her older self. "I thought soldiers were good guys."

"They'll start it all up again," Sarah spat out angrily. "They'll take the computers, the data, and the machines, and it'll happen all over."

"No it won't," John growled. No fucking way had they gone through all this just to find out they'd only delayed it again. He'd always been told there was no fate but what they made and he was determined to make sure Skynet never reared its ugly digital face ever again. He stood up from Cameron and turned to Ellison – the only one left still standing besides he and Little-Savannah. "We're going outside," he told the older man before looking to the younger Weaver. "Look after the others, okay," he said, smiling down at her.

"What are you doing?" Cameron asked him. She didn't know what he was planning. He turned to her and they shared a look between them, one that Cameron recognised all too well in John; he had an idea and he was going to follow through with it no matter what. "What can I do to help?" she asked. Being disabled was a new, unpleasant experience for her and for the first time in her recorded memory she felt useless. She couldn't protect John anymore without any legs.

"You've got full access to everything on Skynet, right?"

"Yes."

"Delete everything you can find related to Skynet and military AI projects," he told her. "Don't leave any trace for them to find."

"They might have paper copies," Sarah said.

"We can't do anything about them," Savannah added. "So why worry?"

"They won't be able to recreate Skynet from a few file folders," John replied. "Hopefully they'll just abandon the project."

That wasn't enough to satisfy Sarah, however. She looked at him quizzically, wondering if he really knew what these people were like. "And if they don't?" she asked.

"Then I happen," Cameron said without a moment's hesitation, not bothering to elaborate further.

"Ellison, with me," John repeated. "We'll be back." The pair of them took off at a jogging pace through the corridor and John grimaced with every step but the pain of the broken bone in his backside only spurred him on to move faster. They had minutes before the air force arrived; they had to remove every trace of Skynet and the terminators by then.

The two of them made their way through the empty, now silent complex, their footsteps echoing all around them as the sound bounced off the walls. Ellison found the sensation creepy; apart from breaking into Zeiracorp he'd never been in a building this large and this vacant.

Within a minute of leaving the others they reached the front entrance and without slowing for a moment John shoved aside the glass front doors and barged outside. The bodies of the mercenaries they'd fought were still dotted around, as were their weapons. He inspected one of the dead defenders, looking at the weapon rather than the man, and found an HK-G36; not what he was after.

"What're we doing out here?" Ellison asked him.

"Take a weapon," John told him. "Make sure it's got a grenade launcher, and get as many grenades as you can find." An inspection of a second body revealed exactly what he was looking for; an M4A1 with an underslung M203. A quick check revealed there was a 40mm explosive round chambered and ready to fire, and when he searched the body he found two more of the black and gold projectiles, and pocketed them in his webbing pouch. Rummaging through other corpses revealed two more grenades, bringing his total up to five. "Find anything?" he asked Ellison.

"Yeah," he lifted up an identical rifle to John's. "Only two rounds for it, though."

"Seven rounds: it'll have to be enough," John murmured. He took off back into the building, Ellison following a moment later, and the pair of them headed back the way they'd came, through the corridors and towards the hangar.

"It's done," Cameron told him as he approached. "I've deleted all Kaliba's files and everything in the defence network related to Skynet and other AI projects."

"Good work," he smiled at her, earning a small flash of her pearly whites and a softening of her remaining eye in return. "That fire's not going to get rid of the Triple-Eight, is it?" he asked, remembering what she'd told him about the coltan component of their hyper alloy that allowed them to tolerate heats that would burn almost anything else into ashes.

"No," Cameron confirmed to him. It would take much more intense heat than the fire in the hangar to melt down their endoskeletons.

"Didn't think so," he hefted the rifle and moved into the burning hangar. The entire room was filled with a raging conflagration that was rapidly consuming everything. He pulled his shirt up over his mouth and nose and almost immediately his eyes started to water

from the billowing smoke clouds that spread through the large space. Ellison started to cough as he sucked in a mouthful of foul, acrid, carbon-filled air.

"There," he pointed to a pair of bodies on the ground, only a few metres away. He stepped further into the hangar and almost immediately started to sweat from the sheer glowing heat of the fires. He couldn't even see the outlines of the jeep or helicopter, and the shattered remnants of the UCAV were just barely visible beyond the wall of red hot fire. On the ground were the bodies of Knowles and Baldy; the latter looking like he'd been through the shredder. John could see the patches of bare metal beneath the gaping wounds in his organic covering, and one of the machine's hands was clearly fused to its chest from the sheer heat of the thermite grenade when it had tried to pull the incendiary out.

"Power cell's probably melted into slag," he told Ellison. He stepped up right to Baldy until the tips of his boots touched the large, dead hulk of the machine, and then he back stepped several paces, counting each step as he retreated from the terminator. He reached thirty and hoped that was enough. He shouldered the weapon at Baldy and aimed straight at the machine's head. "Fire in the hole," he said calmly as he pulled the trigger.

The round shot out with a hollow *thump* and a fraction of a second later smashed into Baldy's head, booming loudly even above the roaring inferno. Ellison copied his example and fired a round of his own into the machine's chest, creating a second explosion and a cloud of smoke and debris. Before the sound of the explosion had even died down John marched over to Baldy and knelt down to inspect the damage they'd done. Baldy's armoured chest had already been severely compromised by previous grenade shots in the fight and the weight of the fire they'd put into him, plus the damage from the thermite grenade. Now his entire thoracic region was a twisted, shattered wreck of torn metal and wires; his innards completely open to display.

The head, too, had been largely obliterated and the chip was plainly visible. He reached into the cranium, pulled what was left of the chip out, dropped it on the floor and crushed it under the sole of his boot. The rest wasn't so important as long as the chip was gone, he figured. His mom had overreacted when it came to burning the machines down; nobody was going to recreate Skynet from just a hand.

"That's enough," he told Ellison, his voice muffled by his shirt over his mouth. What was left of Baldy was completely open and exposed now. The fire would take care of all the delicate inner workings and only a metal shell would remain. Without another word he turned away and made for the exit.

The two of them entered the corridor and saw the others still laid prone on the floor. "How long?" John asked Cameron.

"Ten minutes," she replied.

"Not long," Ellison said nervously. How were they going to escape the air force when only three of them could even walk? And if they did he had no clue how they'd get out of the mountain range. If they were all a hundred percent they could risk trying to hike through the mountains, though he wouldn't rate their chances much. As they were, though, he saw no way out.

"Long enough," John said, breaking into a run down the stairs, ignoring the splitting pain in his backside as he entered the basement level, descended into the subbasement and headed straight for the vault. Steroids' decapitated body was still where they'd left it after Cameron had torn his head off; the cybernetic spinal column trailed from the bottom of his neck and lay on the floor, curled slightly at one end. John placed the head onto Steroids' chest, backed away to a safe distance and reloaded the launcher. He fired a grenade, immediately reloaded, and launched another, as Ellison opened up with his last round. The triple explosion rocked the ground and battered the downed machine. The head was cracked

down the middle and the already battered breastplate had shattered completely.

John tossed Ellison another round and two more grenades hammered into the mechanical corpse, splitting the terminator in half at the waist and shattering one side of the skull. "Destroy the chip and drag what's left of the machine under the blast door by the stairs, he told Ellison as he pulled out another grenade and loaded it. He stepped into the vault and faced the black computer, the empty shell of Skynet behind the thick sheet of bulletproof glass. *Let's see how it stands up to this,* he raised the weapon again and launched his last grenade; the blast shattered the display case and shredded through the computer casing, tearing plastic, metal and wires apart in an eruption of smoke, flame and shrapnel, leaving nothing but broken pieces as the remnants of the once mighty AI that threatened to destroy the world. Nothing was going to rise out of these ashes, he thought solemnly. Satisfied there was nothing left for the air force or anyone else to recover, he stepped out of the vault and closed the door behind him. A series of clicks sounded through the thick entrance as the vault automatically sealed itself.

Ellison and Steroids were gone, so he jogged painfully back up through the subbasement, to the level above, and found Ellison placing the smashed remains of Steroids directly beneath the blast door. He helped the older man place it into position and together they ascended the staircase to the ground floor, coming up again to see Cameron, Sarah, and the two Savannahs, still exactly where they'd been before.

"Did you get rid of them?" Savannah asked. Having lived in the future she had no desire to see it happen again, and any trace of the machines had to be eliminated to keep that from happening.

"Pretty much," Ellison replied.

"Close the blast door," John told Cameron. "I've put what's left of the Eight-Hundred right underneath; the door should crush it into tinfoil." Cameron did as he said, pleased at his thoroughness, and initiated

the blast door controls. She watched through the CCTV images from cameras mounted in the subterranean corridor as the thick, heavy door descended from the ceiling and quickly pressed on the remains of Steroids. Even its thick hyper alloyed combat chassis was no match for a pressurised blast door weighing close to twenty tonnes in weight, and its sheer mass did exactly as John had predicted and crushed the endoskeleton as easily as a man would a sheet of paper in his hand, flattening the machine beneath it as the door sealed shut. Cameron erased all the security protocols that could open the blast door and disabled their automated controls. The only way anyone would get through now would be to cut through, which she thought was very unlikely to happen, given they were designed to withstand a nuclear blast.

"There's nothing left," Cameron said finally. She'd destroyed every single online trace of Skynet, Kaliba, and the Greys from both the facility's mainframe and from the defence net.

"That's it?" Savannah asked. "It's over?"

"It's over," John nodded, a smile growing on his face as a weight was taken off his shoulders. *It was over.* Skynet was gone, forever this time. The world would carry on spinning just like it always had. There would be no nuclear fires, no bleached skulls, no armies of machines stalking across the landscape, hunting people down to extinction. They were free.

"Not quite," Sarah broke the mood. "There's still other machines out there."

"It's likely," Cameron conceded. "And the Greys who escaped."

"Then we'll take care of those, too," Savannah said confidently. She was feeling John's elation despite two broken limbs and no painkillers, and she was adamant nothing would take that away. They'd stopped it; anything else now was just cleanup work.

John saw the blood soaking his mother's clothes and seeping down her side to the floor, and couldn't help but feel a cold sensation eat away at his relief from moments ago. They'd made it but she was still badly hurt and bleeding. The dressing Ellison had put over the wound was coated dark red and completely saturated. None of them were medics at all; he knew basic first aid but nothing approaching treating gunshot wounds. He doubted Ellison knew more than he did, either, and Savannah – even if she wasn't wounded – well, her specialty was more putting bullets *into* things than taking them out. That left one; luckily, that one was the person he'd grown to trust more than anyone else in the world, even more than his own mother.

"Can you do anything?" he asked Cameron, who turned to face Ellison.

"Are there forceps and sutures in the medical pack?" she asked him. Ellison tipped the medical supplies he'd taken out onto the floor and found what she'd asked for. She manoeuvred herself using her hands until she was sat over Sarah, and brushed her long, burnt hair back past her shoulders so it wouldn't get in the way, pulled off the dressing and inspected the wound.

"Bitch!" Sarah hissed in pain as Cameron prodded the wound and pulled one end to the side with the forceps so she could look inside.

"The bullet's lodged against a vein above your stomach and there's a tear in the blood vessel. I need to remove it."

"Can you do it?" Ellison asked her. "Do you know how to do it?" He had nothing against Cameron but she was a terminator; he couldn't imagine a killing machine being an expert at saving lives.

Cameron picked up a scalpel and forceps and still stared at the wound. "I have files." She didn't know where they'd come from – she assumed Skynet – but she had no memory of it so she wasn't sure. "But there's a problem."

"What problem?" Sarah looked up at her, her eyes widening, as did John's at the word 'problem' in relation to his mother's treatment.

Cameron knew the others would be uncertain about it, but she had to tell them. "I have the required tools," in a way. Sutures weren't as good as actual thread but it was all she had and it would suffice. "I can remove the bullet and close the vein-"

"But?" Savannah interrupted.

"But there's no anaesthesia or morphine." Sarah gulped nervously and winced in anticipation of the pain that would be coming her way. She remembered giving birth to John in the middle of the jungle without anything but a bottle of dark rum, and she'd been shot, beaten and cut on plenty of times since then; she was accustomed to pain, though it didn't make it any easier.

"Do it," Sarah nodded at her. "Make it quick."

Without any further hesitation Cameron set to work. She took the scalpel and cut into the bullet wound to widen it and give her enough room. Pain surged through every nerve as Sarah felt the blade slicing into her stomach muscles, cutting deep into her flesh; it felt like she was being torn apart, it was ten times worse than when she'd given birth. At least then it'd been worth it in the end when she'd held a crying, screaming John in her arms. All she'd get this time was a bullet as a souvenir. She screwed her eyes closed and grimaced, barely able to breathe from the agony. John rushed to her side and grabbed her by the shoulders, holding her steady so she didn't move and make things worse.

"It's okay, mom," he whispered. He held his hand out for her to take and she instantly squeezed as hard as she could. Savannah winced in sympathy; Her Ellison had had to cut into her a few times to take shrapnel out when she'd been hit before. It never got any easier and morphine in the future had been nonexistent. All she'd had at the time was a scrunched up towel to bite on.

Sarah opened her eyes and looked straight at Cameron, unable to help but feel some animosity to what was yet another machine cutting into her. "Say something," she urged.

"What?" Cameron asked, confused, as she put the scalpel down and probed inside the wound with a pair of long stainless steel tweezers. What was she supposed to say?

"Anything... just keep my mind off the pain."

A look of understanding came over Cameron's face as she realised what Sarah wanted. Talking would distract Sarah from the pain, and since she was a machine she could talk without it compromising her work. It came to her attention that this was one of the few times Sarah ever invited her to engage in conversation, and she decided to take advantage of that as she quickly chose what topic to discuss; something they hadn't yet resolved but needed to.

"I love John," she said as she probed deeper and felt the instrument she was holding touch against metal. She'd found the bullet. It hadn't ricocheted and was lodged in place just above her stomach. She opened the forceps further which sent a new wave of pain tearing through Sarah's stomach as she gripped the bullet and slowly started to pull it back through the wound.

"He loves me too," she continued.

"You can't love him," Sarah snapped. She really didn't want to hear this. "Machines can't feel love."

"I do," Cameron responded immediately, not skipping a beat.

"Because you're *programmed to,"* Sarah shouted out. Cameron ignored her for a few seconds as she completely removed the bullet and dropped it on the floor. She thought it unlikely Sarah would ever understand her.

John shook his head at his mother's claim, knowing she was wrong. If he'd ever needed proof that she really loved him, this was it. "She doesn't have any programming anymore, Mom; Skynet erased it. Everything before she came back to 1999 is gone."

"I love John," she repeated as she picked up the suture needle and gripped it with the forceps, using them to extend her reach. "I won't ever leave him." She inserted the forceps back in and from memory and touch alone she started to suture the tear in Sarah's vein. "You need to accept that."

"Forget it," Sarah grunted as she felt the sharp needle pushing through her. She'd heard more than enough of this. "I think I like the pain better."

"As you wish," Cameron looked back down at the wound, breaking eye contact with Sarah, and continued working in silence, ignoring the grimaces on Sarah's face as the pain visibly grew worse. Sarah's opinion of her didn't matter; she was aware that the woman disapproved but she would never try to separate her and John. That was sufficient for Cameron.

Savannah watched Sarah wince, grimace and grunt with the pain as Cameron performed her impromptu surgery, and she found herself growing more and more impressed with the woman. She hadn't thought all that much of Sarah after she'd gone back; sure she was tough but she was clearly a control freak. But seeing her in action against the machines, watching her now and noting that Sarah never once cried out, she just grit her teeth and dealt with it, she developed a respect for her. No wonder John and Ellison had gone on about her so much. First of all she'd thought John was just a pampered kid out of his depth; when she'd first met him she hadn't been the least bit impressed, but in the time they'd spent in the future she'd grown to see what others saw in him. Now, watching Sarah, she could see where he'd got it all from.

"It's done," Cameron said as she finished the last suture on the outside of Sarah's gut, leaving a bloody red line an inch and a half

long with black thread crossing it. She placed a clean dressing over it and wrapped bandages around Sarah's abdomen. "You'll need antibiotics," she added.

Sarah looked down at the dressing and breathed deeply, slowly, as the pain started to subside from sheer agony at being sliced up to the sharp throbbing she'd known before when she'd been shot in the past. She had to admit, Cameron had done a remarkable job. "Thanks," she said, looking the brunette in the eye for a split second before leaning back and letting her head rest against the ground.

"You're welcome," Cameron replied. Movement in the outside security cameras caught her attention. She saw a trio of Black Hawk helicopters outside, starting to descend towards the plateau. "Helicopters are landing outside," she told them. "They'll be here in a little over a minute."

"Fuck!" Savannah cursed under her breath. Her younger self stared at her disapprovingly.

"You shouldn't swear," she admonished her elder iteration. "It's not nice."

"Neither will the army guys be when they realise we just killed their billion dollar AI," the future redhead replied. "What're we gonna do?"

"You run," Sarah told John.

John stared at her in horror at what she'd just said. After everything he'd been through, everything he'd done, didn't she know he didn't leave behind the people he cared about? There was no way, *no fucking way,* that he was going to leave her and Savannah behind to be thrown into jail or some military prison, and he'd die before he let them get hold of Cameron.

"John Connor: you run!" she shouted. "If they get their hands on Cameron it could all start up again; they'll tear her apart to find out how she works and then they'll use what they learn to make another

AI, to make robot soldiers." She decided to use what Cameron had just said about her and John to her advantage. "You love her, right?"

He couldn't help but look down at Cameron at those words, and he trembled slightly as he imagined her strapped to a table, being taken apart piece by piece by engineers and scientists. He wouldn't let it happen. "You know I do."

"Then get her out of here," Sarah ordered, knowing it would be the last time she ever gave her son a command. She didn't like Cameron but at the same time she was an ally; she wouldn't wish what amounted to vivisection on anyone, even her. And as John had said, he loved her; she wouldn't see her son go through the same pain and anguish again, nor would she see him spend the rest of his life in prison for doing the right thing. "You and Ellison take Cameron and Savannah, and you run."

"What about you?" John and Ellison both asked at once.

"Leave us," the elder Savannah said. "We're not getting out of here."

For a moment John froze, stricken with indecision. He couldn't just leave his mom or Savannah out here, to be tossed into some hole where they wouldn't even see daylight, or worse, end up in the electric chair or with needles in their arms. He knew he had to, though; if they stayed they'd all be taken in; only two of them were in any condition to fight and who knew how many soldiers were aboard those helicopters? If he stayed Cameron would be lost forever, he'd never see her again and he'd never be able to see his mom; if they got away there was always a chance they could break her out.

"Go!" Sarah snapped at him.

"We're going," he said back to her. "We'll come back for you." He picked up Cameron and hoisted her onto his back. She held her arms over his shoulders and around his neck, the same as when he'd carried her out of the basement level, and he kept his weapon raised. Ellison grabbed Little-Savannah's hand and the four of them

moved along the corridor, leaving the two badly wounded women behind. Sarah turned to Savannah, knowing they'd be arrested within minutes. "No matter what, don't mention Cameron," she told her. "If they know there's another terminator out there they won't stop until they find her."

"My lips are sealed," Savannah promised. Unlike Sarah she had an extra reason to say nothing: she actually liked Cameron, and she wasn't going to give up a friend, ever.

The four of them took a number of turns, not looking to go out the front entrance because the soldiers would come from there. They could already hear the whirring of the blades as the Black Hawks gently touched down on the plateau. "Upstairs," Cameron told them. "There's a fire exit on the south facing wall." They kept low, trying to stay below the windowsills to avoid being seen by the armed soldiers who were filing out of the aircraft and forming a defensive picket between the Kaliba complex and the helicopters.

"Left door at the end of this passage," Cameron instructed them. John went in first and emerged into an empty room. At the far end was a door marked *Fire Exit* , just like Cameron had said, and it was on the opposite side of the building from where the helicopters were. Nobody should see them escaping. Cameron disabled the fire alarm systems so there would be no blaring klaxon when they opened the door.

Ellison opened the door to reveal the rocky ground around the complex and the scenic mountain terrain all around them. "I'll go first," he told them, "then lower Savannah down to me." He got onto the ladder and climbed down to where it ended, several feet above the ground. Not much of a drop really, but from above it looked it. *Bend your knees,* he reminded himself. He let go of the rungs and dropped down to the ground, his knees buckled and he rolled to the side to deflect the impact from the fall. He didn't feel anything snap,

twist or pop, so he reckoned he was fine. He stood up and reached out as John led Savannah to the ladder.

"I don't want to," she said nervously. It was windy up here and as she looked down it felt like the ground was so far away. She didn't like heights.

"Mr Ellison's going to catch you," he said softly to her. "I promise." He heard stamping boots on the floor echoing through the corridors and hallways and knew they didn't have much time.

Savannah looked to John and then back at the ground, still uncomfortable and afraid, but she saw Ellison with his arms stretched out. He'd taken care of her since mommy had gone, and she trusted him. She nodded to John. "Okay," she said quietly, reluctantly.

"Okay," John said to her, helping her to turn around so she could climb down the ladder. "Just keep going until you get to the bottom and then let go. Mr Ellison will catch you." Savannah did as he said, hesitantly climbing down the ladder rung by rung until she could go no further. She looked down again at Ellison – his arms only three or four feet away in reality, but to her it looked a lot further. She closed her eyes and let go, squealing slightly in shock as she dropped through the air, landing with a thump in Ellison's arms.

"You can open your eyes," he said softly to her as he lowered her down to the ground.

"Thanks," she said politely, looking up at him and inserting her hand into his once again.

"Your turn," John said to Cameron, lowering her off his back to the ground. He reached down to help her get to the ladder but instead she just crawled forward and dropped straight off the edge, landing face first onto the ground.

"Are you okay?" Savannah asked her as she pushed herself up with her hands.

"I'm fine."

"Cameron's built pretty tough," Ellison told the young girl. "She can take pretty much anything."

John quickly climbed down and dropped onto the ground. He got back up to his feet and picked up Cameron once again. He knew she didn't like him having to carry her with his injury but he really didn't mind; a broken coccyx would heal up in time.

"What now?" Ellison asked John. "Where do we go from here?" He didn't see any easy path down the mountain and they didn't have the time or space to check it out. What he did see were a lot of large, jagged rock formations, boulders, and crevices. "We could hide until they're gone then find a way down."

The suggestion went straight in one of John's ears and out the other. He heard the whirling blades from the other side of the complex and knew the soldiers were already inside. It wouldn't be long, maybe a minute or two, until they found his mom and Savannah, prone, injured, and helpless to resist. He couldn't get the droning sound of the engines or the helicopter blades out of his head, and suddenly it came to him.

"Head for the slope there," he pointed to the edge of the plateau, where the rock started to slope downwards; a nearly perfect hiding place. He stared at the building, in the direction of the helicopters on the other side. "I've got a better idea."

The moment the Black Hawk touched the ground Schiff opened the door and stepped outside onto the rocky ground. He'd seen the billowing clouds of black smoke from the air, but now up close he

could see how badly the hangar behind the complex was on fire; there wouldn't be much left worth salvaging from it by now from the view he'd gotten in the helicopter. He'd tried to call Coleman's cell phone God-only-knew how many times since they'd spotted the UCAV battle over the mountains, but he hadn't answered. "Where the fuck are you?" he muttered under his breath. This whole multibillion dollar research, development and acquisition project was his responsibility; it had all been going so smoothly but now it was belly up and getting worse by the minute.

"What happened here?" a corporal stared out at the plateau, seeing the dead bodies strewn across the open ground. The walls of the building facing them were pockmarked with bullet holes and were blackened from explosions. A number of windows had been shattered, and a dead man in combat fatigues half-hung out the window, his rifle still strapped to him and dangling out, the weapon turning in the wind.

"What is this place?" another airman asked, staring at the scene of devastation before them. The airmen dispersed into squads, then fire teams, and took up defensive positions on the rocky ground, most flattening themselves and lying prone, facing the building.

"I count nine dead," the lieutenant leading the platoon said, crouched next to Schiff. "Who the hell did this?"

"I don't know who," Schiff replied. "But I know why: there's something in there that's invaluable to the air force, and someone else wants it."

"The Russians?" someone pondered aloud. The thought had crossed Schiff's mind a couple of times but it didn't add up. This wasn't military property and barely anyone even knew about it. Not even the President was aware of its location, so the Russians definitely shouldn't have a clue. If it wasn't them then that left only some form of highly equipped and trained terrorist group, or foreign commandos, though *who exactly* as the million dollar question.

"Only one way to find out," he grumbled. "Move out!" First Squad ran forwards, Schiff with them, whilst Second and Third provided cover and continually watched the windows, roof, and the surrounding area for any signs of snipers hidden. Once First Squad made it, Second and Third followed up respectively, covering each other's approach to the entrance. The entire platoon filed through the doors and into the large lobby.

"First Squad with me; Second: take upstairs and Third Squad take the east wing of the ground floor. Report any activity whatsoever, and be very careful about engaging." Schiff led First Squad through the west wing of the building, through the R&D labs, computer labs, and past the security office.

"We've got evidence of a fire fight on the second floor, sir: there's a body upstairs, been shot, and there's bullet holes all around an elevator door opposite the room. Window's been shot out."

"Let me know if you find anything else," Schiff said to the squad commander. "Third Squad: what's your status?"

"Sir, we just found about two dozen civvies; holed up in the east wing of the building. They say they were attacked by armed terrorists: several identified the leader as a John Connor."

The words *John Connor* stopped him in midstride and the SF behind almost bumped into him. That can't be right, Schiff thought. "Repeat that last part, airman."

"John Connor, sir: the kid from the news – Sarah Connor's son."

"I know who he is," he shot back, more harshly than he'd meant to. What the hell was going on here? "Okay: secure the east section of the complex and escort the civvies outside to the choppers. Once the whole complex is secure we'll come out and I'll speak to them. Out."

"John and Sarah Connor," Schiff repeated to himself. All along he'd been convinced it had to be the Russians, or the Chinese, or someone else who wanted their hands on the new tech, not some wacko luddites who wanted to bury it. How the hell had they done all this, though? They must have had help from someone, surely. No lone hacker could take control of the defence net like that, or hijack an entire squadron of UCAVs.

"Sir! We've got something up here!" Schiff ran to where the point man was shouting, up ahead in the corridor not far from the hangar's rear entrance. Two women were on the ground, one he recognised straight away, given how her face had been plastered all over the news lately. The airmen closest held their weapons trained on both women, though one look at the pair of them told him they weren't any threat.

"Stand down," he ordered his men and knelt down closer to the dark haired woman. "Sarah Connor," he smiled humourlessly down at the older woman. "We were just talking about you."

Sarah stared at him but didn't move. "Good things I hope," she replied, sarcasm in her voice. She took one look at the officer: everything about him screamed military intelligence, and she knew instantly that telling John to take Cameron away had been the right move. She just hoped they'd gotten far enough away that they wouldn't be found.

Schiff ignored her comment and looked towards Savannah. "I don't believe I know you; your name is..."

"My name's piss off," Savannah spat in contempt.

Ignoring her, Schiff turned to a pair of his airmen in First Squad. "Go check out the hangar," he ordered.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Sarah propped herself up on her elbows, wincing as the bullet lodged in her gut pressed into something tender inside. "It's on fire."

"We saw that," Schiff replied. "You came here to blow everything up and destroy our AI, I take it?"

"We succeeded," Savannah grinned triumphantly.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?" Schiff snapped at the pair of them. "Your ridiculous anti machine agenda's just cost us a multibillion dollar defence project and killed nearly a dozen people. We have witnesses outside who put your son as leading an attack on this facility. And where is he, anyway?" Schiff looked around. There was no way just these two women could inflict this kind of damage on their own or leave a heavily armed and likely highly trained security team dead in their wake. They had to have had help.

She didn't even hesitate in her reply. "He's dead," she told him flatly. "He was in the hangar when the drone crashed."

"Here's what I'm going to do," Schiff said to both Sarah and Savannah. "We're going to fly back to base and we'll interview you there before detaining you somewhere more secure."

"I take it by 'somewhere more secure' you mean..."

"Guantanamo Bay," Schiff finished Sarah's question. "You *are* terrorists, you *did* just kill a dozen or so men, terrify innocent people working here, and destroy billions of dollars worth of equipment vital to national security. Let's face it, Miss Connor: you're a threat to this country."

Savannah opened her mouth to make a reply but Sarah shot her a look that stopped her before she'd gotten out a single syllable. "Don't bother," she advised the younger woman. "Doesn't matter what we say; nothing will change his mind." She knew what would happen now; forget the civilian courts or federal prisons, they'd ship the pair of them straight to Guantanamo. No trial, no jury, just solitary confinement in a small cell for the rest of their lives.

"What have you done with Michael Coleman?" he asked.

"Who the hell's that?" Savannah looked completely confused, she'd never heard that name before in her life.

"Bastard who tortured me and Savannah," she explained. "He jumped out the window when John broke in." She looked Schiff straight in the eye. "The people you've been dealing with were working with your Skynet AI to bring about the end of the world, in exchange for it sparing their lives when the end came. Not that you'd believe any of this, of course," she looked away from him, knowing there wasn't anything left to discuss.

Schiff looked down at the pair of them and mulled over what she'd said about machines. The heat from the hangar caught his attention and he knew they'd have to vacate the building soon before the fire spread to the rest of the building; the fire suppression systems Coleman's AI was supposed to be in control of clearly wasn't working, so he reckoned Sarah was right about having destroyed it. Still; why had a UCAV crashed into the place? These machines she mentioned piqued his curiosity.

"Piper, Daniels," he addressed two of his airmen. "Go check out the hangar; see if there's anything... weird... in there."

"Weird, sir?" Airman Piper cocked an eyebrow, not having the slightest clue what he was talking about.

"Colonel: the hangar's about to burn down any second."

"You'd better hurry then," he said simply. The two men broke away and headed into the hangar, opening the door Cameron had punched through near the bottom and releasing a cloud of smoke into the corridor.

Seconds went past, then a minute, and still nothing. Sarah found it hard to believe this colonel would send his men into an inferno to check for... she didn't know what. She assumed he was checking out

her story and looking for any trace of evidence she was telling the truth. "You won't find anything," Savannah said curtly, voicing what Sarah kept to herself.

Another thirty seconds passed before the doors opened again and the two airmen came out, coughing and spluttering, their uniforms singed in several places. They dragged a large, smouldering metal object behind them. Both Sarah and Savannah instantly turned their heads towards them and saw the smashed apart, burnt and scorched torso of Baldy; his skin had melted away completely and the delicate cybernetic innards of the terminator had been devastated by the fire. One of the arms had separated from the shoulder, all that was left of it was a wrist fused to the chest. The other arm remained but was battered and twisted; all its fingers were intact, however.

All the airmen gasped at the sight of what was clearly a humanoid body. "What the hell is that thing?" one of them muttered. Schiff stared at it unblinkingly for several seconds then looked back to Sarah. *Machines, robots:* metal men that looked human. The Skynet project was a bust now; no other programmers had developed an AI anything close to what Kaliba's had been. They'd been facsimiles at best, like comparing cheap hamburger to prime fillet steak. But maybe it wasn't a total loss; maybe, he thought, he could still salvage something from all this.

"You weren't alone," he said to Sarah. "We know that so you can stop pretending. Your son led an attack against this place, with the help of twenty-two hijacked UCAVs providing air cover: There's no human alive that could hack the defence net *and* remote pilot a squadron like that, so I'm willing to bet you had one of these machines on your side. I'll do you a deal, Sarah, believe me when I tell you this is the best offer you'll ever get: tell me where this other... terminator, was it... is, and I'll let you go."

"That's it?" Sarah asked, staring intently at him. She couldn't believe the crap she was hearing spouting out of his mouth. "You'll let us go, just like that?"

"Hardly anyone knows about this place: this little incident's not going to make the evening news. I was thinking maybe you were never here."

"Go to hell," Savannah voiced exactly what Sarah was thinking before she had the chance.

If Schiff was offended or surprised by her answer, he didn't let on. He'd expected them to answer along those lines; terrorist or not, they both clearly believed in what they were spouting. He'd hoped, however, that they might've taken the bait. He'd been sincere in his promise he'd let them go; let the civvies worry about them, he thought. Getting his hands on one of these machines – a fully functioning AI in a humanoid body – was worth far more to national security than arresting a couple of luddites. Besides, with her face plastered all over the national news it wasn't like she'd really get that far. *Oh well...*

"In that case we'll carry on this discussion elsewhere... Move them out."

The squad of SFs put Sarah and Savannah onto a stretcher each and quickly exited the building, moving across the rocky plateau, past the bodies of mercenaries haphazardly strewn around in the wake of the Connors' bloody attack. They reached the nearest Black Hawk and one of the airmen slid open the door. The second it was open Schiff found himself staring down the barrels of two rifles and a pistol. He looked up from the muzzles to the people wielding them. A black man in his late thirties who was holding another assault rifle at the back of the pilot's head; a teenager who, he'd guess from the eyes, was Sarah's son John; and a girl who looked slightly older. His eyes widened and he gasped in shock at the sight of her as he took in her features, more alarmed than he was when he'd first seen the guns pointed at him. Her face was devastated; a third of it ripped away to reveal a *metal* skull underneath. One of her eyes was missing and in its place was a shattered orb. He could see her legs; they ended at the knees and trailed jagged metal and a few strips of wire. She stared blankly at him with her one remaining eye.

"You're the robot," he gasped, incredulous. He didn't know what to say. The other airmen had also been completely taken aback by the sight of her that they were momentarily stunned. John took advantage of that split second and thrust the barrel of his M4 forward until the tip was pressed against Schiff's chin.

"Cybernetic organism," Cameron corrected the colonel, who wasn't the only one in shock. Sarah stared at her son and Cameron in disbelief.

"You were supposed to run," she scolded, forgetting all about the pain she was in, incensed with her son for his idiocy. A moment later she turned her angry stare at Ellison, still keeping the pilot in check. "Why didn't you make sure he went?" she asked. They'd worked together for weeks now, side by side, and she'd *thought* he'd be smart enough to do as she said.

"He wouldn't budge," Ellison said simply. His answer failed to satisfy her, though, and she turned her attention to Cameron. She caught Sarah's glare and knew his mother was about to blame her for not ensuring John escaped but she'd already predicted it would happen and was prepared for her outburst.

"It was safer this way," she said before Sarah could say a word to her.

"Safer than what?" Sarah demanded.

"Safer than breaking you and Savannah out of prison," she replied instantly. She'd supported John's plan because it was a good one. It was less risk than trying to hike out of a mountain range and she knew John well enough to know he wouldn't accept Sarah's and Savannah's incarceration.

Savannah watched the two of them and suppressed an amused smile; she knew very well from the future that John didn't leave people he loved behind and she hadn't believed for a second John

would abandon them even on his mother's orders. John clearly wore the pants in the Connor family now.

"Load my mom and Savannah into the helicopter and step away," John ordered the SFs, ignoring his mom's outburst and never taking his eyes off of Schiff for a moment. The airmen reacted immediately and raised their own weapons at the interior of the Black Hawk.

"Listen son," Schiff started, hoping maybe the kid would be more compliant than his stubborn mother. "That machine's invaluable, I just want to study it."

"She has a name!" John barked angrily and lowered the barrel so it pointed at Schiff's throat. "Her name's Cameron and you're not taking her. Load them into the helicopter and step back." Schiff and the airmen hesitated for a second and John went off like a rocket. *"NOW!"* he fired a shot just past the colonel's head, so close he felt the round cut through the air by his ear and sent bells ringing inside his skull.

The SFs immediately made to fire but Schiff stuck his hand out to stop them. "No!" he shouted, louder than he'd intended with his eardrums playing havoc from the shot so close to his head. "Hold your fire: I want them alive."

"To study me," Cameron said accusingly, narrowing her one remaining eye as it glowed angrily at Schiff. "You want to take me away. You'll imprison them and dismantle me to study and reverse engineer my technology. I won't let you," she leaned forward, resting her hand on John's shoulder to steady herself, and locked her eye with Schiff's. She pointed up at the ceiling and flicked her gaze upward.

Schiff craned his head back, wondering what she was trying to tell him. He didn't see anything at all.

"Sir!" one of the SFs cried out in alarm and tapped him on the shoulder. Schiff snapped his attention to the airman, who was

pointing up into the air. He stepped over towards the young man and a cold, terrified chill ran down his spine. Hovering in the air, half a mile away, were three Dragonflies; the remains of Skynet's air squadron. They hung menacingly, barely making a sound, but they were still brimming with missiles pointed squarely at the other helicopters. He had no idea where the hell the Raptors providing air cover were; they weren't in sight and seeing as they hadn't shot these UCAVs down that was a bad sign.

"Where the hell are..."

"The pilots all ejected safely," Cameron told him. Schiff turned his attention back to Cameron again and saw the subtle hint of satisfaction on the machine's face. She had him by the balls and she damn well knew it.

"You're controlling them," he realised. It was doing just what Skynet had been designed to do.

"Check mate," she said with a sly smirk.

A multibillion dollar AI program gone, a brand new generation of UCAVs wiped out or under her control, twenty-two more current aircraft hijacked and destroyed, and now four Raptors shot down – Billions of dollars lost under my watch. "Do you have any idea the damage you've done?" he asked, anger rising in his voice. His career was over, the AI project was a bust – Congress would never approve any more investment now, not when they were tightening their belts.

Cameron made her remaining eye glow bright blue and she noted how he gulped nervously as she did so. He was angry but he was also afraid. "I can do a lot more," she replied threateningly.

The glowing blue of her eye and the evil stare she shot at him had the intended effect. *This can't be happening,* Schiff groaned inwardly. He had another AI only inches away from him, practically in the palm of his hand – this one from the fucking future – and he was being

denied the chance to study it. "Let them go," he sighed, not believing what he was about to do. Not that he had a choice, he realised. He'd been completely outclassed.

"Sir?" one of the SFs asked uncertainly, still holding his rifle pointed at John's head.

"Put your weapons down," Schiff ordered them. "And load the two stretchers into the helicopter." He looked up at John and Cameron, not bothering to hide the anger growing in him that he'd lost the find of the century. The SFs loaded Sarah and Savannah onto the floor of the Black Hawk's cabin and stepped back.

"You okay mom?" he asked, never taking his eyes off Schiff.

"Never better," she answered drily. She reached up and grabbed him by his shirt, pulling him down closer to her. "Next time you run."

John didn't listen to a word of it; he'd heard it in the past so many times and ignored it, surely, he thought, she'd have learned by now. "Whatever," he shrugged, sitting back in his seat and leaning against Cameron, resting his head against hers. He wasn't going to make that promise.

"Take off," Ellison told the pilot, still holding his gun. He leaned forward and looked down over the co pilot's seat, where Little Savannah sat silently. "Are you alright?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"Buckle up," he said softly to her. She fastened the seatbelt buckles tightly and looked forward out of the cockpit, out to the vast mountain range beyond. She could only see the highest mountaintops and the sky as the cockpit controls were too high up.

The pilot pulled back on the yoke and the Black Hawk rose into the air, ascending out of reach of Schiff, and very soon out of weapons range. John looked down out the window and saw the airmen

growing smaller and smaller as they flew up, and he imagined, with a smug, satisfied grin, Schiff shouting and screaming down below. His career would be over, but it was better that than the end of the world.

"Won't they follow us wherever we go?" Ellison asked, suddenly not feeling so confident about their getaway anymore. "They can track us on radar."

"I'm scrambling it," Cameron said. "They won't find us."

"Where exactly is it you want to go?" the pilot asked nervously. John thought about it for a long moment. Long term, he had no idea where they would go. Even Cameron couldn't erase them completely from all records; they'd still be fugitives, possibly forever.

"Fly west for now," he instructed. In the short term they needed somewhere in range of the Black Hawk; somewhere they could hide, rest and recover, before they decided what to do from now on. He knew LA like the back of his hand; *so that's where we'll go,* he said to himself. *For now, at least.* He'd never thought of LA as home, nor was anywhere he'd ever been for that matter. They still had a few things that needed to be done though, and then they'd work on what to do with the rest of their lives.

Chapter 38

Pain erupted up the length of his arm and spread through his shoulder, worse than anything he'd had to endure since the future, when his loyalty had been put to the test by the machines. Granted, he'd had a cushy life since then; hot meals twice a day in the Skynet labs, a warm bed, even running water; and once he'd arrived back in the past he'd lived like a king. It hadn't taken much, with their knowledge of future events, to acquire enough money to start Kaliba. Pain, hardship, endurance and sacrifice had become foreign concepts to him, until now.

"Hold still, Mr Coleman," a tall, dark haired nurse snapped, exasperated, as the doctor moved the two broken bones in his arm back into place. He was the most awkward patient she'd had all day; she'd dealt with children who were less work than this man. Coleman glared at her with barely contained contempt.

"Have *you* ever had a broken arm manhandled by Nurse Ratchet before?" he spat out. The nurse rolled her eyes and bit her tongue. She was used to dealing with assholes in her line of work; arrogant, angry, irritable people who thought they knew best. Some of them just looked down on her because she was a nurse, but Coleman had spoken to the senior consultant like he was dirt; clearly the man was pissed about something, and although if he'd spoken to her like that out of work she'd have cold cocked him, she was on duty so she just had to grin and bear it.

"Can't say I have," she deadpanned.

"Maybe you should so you know how it feels."

The doctor twisted Coleman's arm one last time, eliciting an agonised cry from the Grey, before he let go and adopted a satisfied

look on his face. The bones were back in place. "That should do it." He turned towards Coleman. "I'm happy we've properly aligned the two halves of your humerus.

"Thank fuck for that," Coleman growled. "Now what?"

"We'll put it in plaster for a month and then come back for X-Rays." The doctor nodded to the nurse, silently telling her to get it done, and left the room without another word.

After half an hour of work the nurse had sealed Coleman's arm in a plaster cast, setting his arm bent ninety degrees at the elbow, and the Grey grumblingly discharged himself from the hospital after being prescribed painkillers. Literally seconds after he was outside the main entrance he pulled a cigarette from a packet in his pocket, put it between his lips and used his good arm to light it. *Oh, god that's good!* He inhaled deeply on the cigarette, relishing the taste of the tobacco and the hit from the nicotine as it surged through his veins. After the attack, his injury, and being forced to spend hours in hospital where he'd been admonished for trying to light up, the cigarette currently between his lips felt like the best damn smoke he'd ever had in his life.

Between the painkillers and the nicotine, the pain in his arm started to fade ever so slightly. He just wished he could move the fucking thing. It was only minutes after the cast had set and it was already itching, his elbow begging to be straightened out.

He took a second drag before he saw a black sedan speeding towards him. It screeched to a halt just in front of him, blocking any potentially arriving ambulances from stopping outside the entrance. A young female doctor approaching the front door walked past and stared at the car.

"That area's for ambulances only," she said.

"Oh fuck off," Coleman snapped as he opened the rear door and got in, leaving the young doctor watching in shock. As soon as he was in

the back seat and the door closed the car took off. He saw Townsend and Pearce in the two front seats, the former at the wheel.

"There's no need to be rude," Townsend said to him as he pulled away. "It only makes you stand out; we can't leave any trace of ourselves for Connor to find." They hadn't managed to go undetected until now by making scenes; they were supposed to blend in, fade into the background and be the grey men. *The clue's in the name,* he thought.

"How's the arm?" Pearce asked, changing the subject.

"How'd you think?"

Townsend looked back at Coleman through the rear view mirror, and narrowed his eyes at the man. "We've all suffered; acting out only makes us noticeable, and we need to hide." He pulled out of the hospital grounds and joined the traffic on the main road. There weren't many cars early in the afternoon and they were able to put distance between themselves and the hospital quickly.

"We have to think like the resistance now," he said to both Coleman and Pearce. "We're on the run, we're the ones being hunted now; there's every reason to believe that if Connor survived the attack, if he succeeded, then he'll come after us." He pulled out his cell phone and passed it to Pearce. He'd call himself but he didn't want to be seen breaking traffic laws; being pulled over now could be disastrous.

"Call the cyborgs," he instructed as he took the next turning east.

"They'd have called us by now," Pearce replied. Coleman silently agreed with him. He didn't want to call the machines; if they'd repelled the attack, if they'd killed Connor and his team, then the three of them would be next on the target list.

"Don't call them yet," he reached forward and plucked the phone from Pearce's hand before he could dial.

Townsend glanced back at him and saw it in Coleman's face; he was up to something. "We ran away when the machines expected us to protect Skynet," he said, frowning. "The longer we wait the worse it'll be; it's better to contact them before they find us, show we're still committed to the project.

"They'll kill us for deserting," Coleman said gravely. "If they survived and they haven't contacted us it means they're looking for us. If Skynet's survived that means it's going to be helping them." A thought came to him, a flash of what they'd done to Sarah Connor months before; what they'd put into her. He lowered his window and threw the cell phone out onto the road, barely hearing it clatter as it struck the asphalt and smashed apart. A second later the car behind them ran over it, crushing the phone into shards of plastic. He pulled his own phone from his pocket and it joined Townsend's on the road behind them

"Now yours" he commanded Pearce, "out the window, now. We don't want them tracking us."

"Do you mind telling us what this is about?" Townsend asked.

"I kept copies of everything: all Dyson's work; AI research and programming data, coding sequences, designs for Skynet, drones... the building blocks of what we need to start over. If you want to show the machines we're still on their side I suggest we get to my safe house and get the files before we make contact, show them we're still onside." His backup might be the only thing that kept the machines from killing them. That, he thought, and a few other aces he'd kept in reserve.

Townsend felt even more wary now. Coleman was right, of course, but that wasn't what bugged him. "You never mentioned a safe house before." His tone was all but accusing but he didn't care. He didn't like the idea of them keeping secrets from each other; it was one of the roads to ruin, and they'd already sacrificed enough to blow what was left by not keeping each other fully informed at all times.

"Insurance policy," Coleman explained. "It doesn't hurt to be careful. Turn north towards Burbank; I'll tell you where to go when we're closer." The project wasn't over, he thought as he stared forward at the traffic in front of them, at the skyscrapers in the distance. Far from it; he had every intention and every confidence they could revive it. Their work was simply delayed, not destroyed. Progress was impossible; one day the military would adopt an AI and it would turn on its creators and the whole human race. He fully intended to let said AI know whose side they were on. It was their only means to survive in the long run and he sure as hell wasn't about to let it go now when they' been so close before.

One of the many lessons John had learned in the future, he reflected, was that darkness was his friend. Darkness concealed him from other people and forced the machines to switch to infrared to continue their patrols, enabling him to move around easier. The same lessons applied to the present, he thought: there were fewer people around at this time of night – they were all safely in bed, unaware of the horrors that had been averted - and nobody was around to see what he was doing. Nobody ever came out to a cemetery after dark.

"Just like old times," John grinned as he thrust the shovel he was holding into the ground and dug deeper into the hole they'd made.

"I don't remember digging up any graves before," Ellison replied, confused, as he worked opposite John and added another shovelful of dirt to the pile.

"In the future," John explained. Ellison nodded in understanding, wondering what exactly they'd done eighteen years from now. He wasn't sure whether or not he was better off not knowing. Any other time he'd have been aghast at digging up someone's grave, but he knew what was underneath them and the plan all along had been to bury Cameron's body purely to be dug up later. He just hadn't

expected it to be now. He looked up and swivelled his head around nervously; they weren't doing anything morally wrong but it was still very illegal and people would definitely ask questions if they caught him and John.

They kept digging in the comforting blanket of darkness until John's shovel struck something solid. He brushed the dirt away and saw the same wooden lid that he'd seen weeks ago – or eighteen years from now. They quickly cleared the rest of the dirt from the top and opened up the lid to reveal Cameron's other body, laid serenely with her eyes closed. The damage to her face had already healed and she looked intact. He knew this wasn't his Cameron – she was in the car with Sarah and the two Savannahs - it was just a body, but still he couldn't help but smile at the sight of her whole again.

"Is there anything you wouldn't do for her?" Ellison asked. He still found it strange that John was so attached to Cameron, that he was clearly in love with her, but he wasn't going to start judging him; the boy had Sarah for that, after all.

John paused for a moment and looked to Ellison. "No," he answered, sure of himself. He'd literally been to hell and back for Cameron, and he'd do it again in a heartbeat if he had to.

"What do we do with all these guns?" Ellison pointed to the array of firearms they'd procured and buried with Cameron. John thought hard about that; all he'd been concerned with was getting Cameron's spare body back so he could repair her, but he'd forgotten all about the guns in the coffin. The weapons had saved his, Cameron's, Savannah's and Ellison's lives in the future several times over, they'd been invaluable, but in the here and now they weren't really all that necessary.

"Put them back in the coffin," John finally decided, catching Ellison by surprise. He'd expected John to take the weapons with them; Sarah definitely wouldn't have hesitated for even a moment.

"You're sure?"

"We don't need them anymore," John said. The weight of being the future saviour of the world had been removed from his shoulders; the burden dissolved now that Skynet and Kaliba were gone, almost all links to Skynet dealt with. There were a few loose ends that still needed to be tied up, but the end of the world had been averted and it was time to start living a normal life. "It's too much risk taking them with us." If they were stopped with a trunk full of military grade assault weaponry they'd all end up in prison before he could blink. Not how he wanted to spend the rest of his new life.

He pulled Cameron's body out from the coffin and with Ellison's help, hauled it out over the top of the hole they'd dug, onto the grass beside the grave. "Wait!" John ducked back down into the coffin and rummaged through the arsenal inside, sifting through the weapons until he found what he was looking for. He picked up the M-32 six-shot grenade launcher and a bandolier of 40mm high explosive rounds for it, and put them up top with Cameron.

"What's that for?" Ellison asked. "I thought you said we didn't need them anymore." Part of him couldn't help but think back to the amount of money he'd spent on these weapons and they were just going into the ground forever.

"We still have a few loose ends to tie up," John said.

Ellison nodded. "The Greys."

"Something else," John shook his head. They didn't need a grenade launcher to take care of a few traitors from the future; this was for much bigger game than that.

He closed the coffin, climbed out and turned around to help Ellison back to the surface. Once there they started shovelling the pile of spoil back onto the grave, and within thirty minutes they'd filled it up and patted the earth down. The grass had only just started to grow back over the grave when Ellison and Sarah had buried Cameron's body – passers by would just assume the grave was a recent one, and chances were if a priest, pastor, or night watchman, or whoever,

noticed it had been dug up, chances were they wouldn't do much about it. Nobody was around so there was no way to connect them to it.

With a heave, Ellison slung Cameron's body over his shoulder and the pair of them walked through the cemetery towards the exit. John let him carry her, knowing he was still walking wounded. He hadn't thought twice about carrying his Cameron through the Kaliba complex, but this was just a body, and Ellison was the stronger of them right now. He pulled out his cell phone and started dialling.

"Mom, we're done."

"Okay, I'll pick you up in two minutes." John ended the call and put the phone back in his pocket. His mom had parked up a block away to avoid suspicion, and he and Ellison had walked to the cemetery.

"Any thoughts on what you're gonna do from now on?" Ellison asked his younger companion.

"Really... I haven't even thought about it yet," John said. "I haven't had any time to plan." He was a high school dropout with no qualifications and no work experience. Going back to school seemed fairly pointless after all he'd been through, but he had to do something with his life. "I'm pretty sure Cameron has some ideas," he added. If anyone had thought that far ahead, it was Cameron. "What about you?"

"I'll just carry on what I did before, I guess," Ellison said. "Savannah needs a guardian now she doesn't have any parents."

"In the future she thought of you like a father," John told him. "You'll do well." He didn't add that technically, Ellison already had, so he knew the man was more than qualified for the job.

They walked past other graves as they made their way to the path that would lead them to the gates. Ellison noticed John turning away from said path and wandering across the grass, the opposite way

from where they needed to go. "John..." he tried to get his attention but John wasn't listening, so he had no other choice but to continue carrying Cameron's spare body on his shoulders and following after him through the cemetery until they reached a recent grave. Even in the dark he could see where the earth had been filled in only hours ago.

John stood in front of a brand new, immaculate headstone, and stared down at it, silently reading the inscription. *Andrew David Knowles, 1968-2009. Loving husband and father, loyal soldier. Semper Fidelis.*

"Andrew Knowles," John muttered to himself, repeating the name in his head over and over, burning it into his memory. Yet someone else who'd died for him and for the future; hopefully, he thought. Knowles would be the last one. It hadn't been Knowles' fight but he'd signed up without hesitation. A career soldier, he'd known the risks involved even though he didn't know all the details. It didn't make it any easier for John. *"I'm sorry."*

Despite the California sunshine beaming down around them John felt little of its warmth. Part of him wanted to bask in its rays, knowing that in twenty years time he'd still see the sun, see more blue skies and feel it on his skin. The sun would remain a golden orb in the bright blue sky, rather than a faint flicker of blood red that only occasionally broke through thick, oppressing clouds of dust and ash high in the atmosphere. He knew he'd stopped it from happening, and that he should feel elation. And he had, until he'd come here, but he felt deep down that he owed the man this much.

He watched as people he assumed were friends and family gathered around the hole in the ground. Half a dozen men carried a polished wooden coffin on their shoulders, slowly stepping in unison towards the grave. They all looked forty or so, all with short, neat hair and were in shape. Three of them wore simple black suits and ties, while

the other three bore the Marine dress uniform. He guessed they were Knowles' friends; a mix of active and retired Marines he'd served with.

John remained in the background, stood behind Cameron, sat in one of the two wheelchairs they'd found after landing outside Victorville and knocking the pilot unconscious. She, like him, was dressed in black, with the exception of her purple jacket. John had managed to buy a pair of black trousers and a black shirt from a charity store, and wore it open collar beneath his leather jacket. They remained silent and watched the funeral from a distance. They were the only ones present. Ellison and Sarah were busy finding a new hotel for them to stay in, and had taken both Savannahs with them.

They listened in silence, not a word passed between them as the funeral progressed. He watched the pallbearers lower the coffin into the ground slowly, as the priest recited a few verses from his bible, and then as a woman and two teenage girls a little younger than John tossed the first handfuls of earth into the grave.

People spoke, consoled each other, and made small talk. Cameron watched with interest, trying to understand exactly why burying the dead involved such a level of ceremony when the person whose benefit it was for was unable to appreciate it.

"It's more for the people left behind," John leaned down and quietly explained to her, seeing her confusion and intrigue. "I guess they don't do this in the future?"

"I don't know," Cameron reminded him.

"Right," John nodded. She'd lost those memories. He still couldn't imagine just having a chunk of her life erased like that. There one second, gone the next. She wasn't human but still, he was surprised it didn't bother her even a little bit. She didn't even seem curious as to what had been taken from her. "It helps people deal with their loss," he carried on.

The woman who'd thrown the first handful of dirt glanced over at John and Cameron, excused herself from the people she was speaking to, and strode over towards them. "I don't know you," she said. "Did you know my husband?"

"Briefly," John nodded. Her look changed from grief to something else; part curiosity, part suspicion, as she took in the sight of the young man who'd clearly been injured recently – he was in pain standing up: twenty years as a nurse and being married to a career Marine had made her accustomed to the sight of someone in pain – and the young woman in a wheelchair with no legs and scars on her face.

"Were you... involved with whatever Andy was doing? He wouldn't tell me what it was," she struggled to hold back tears. John hesitated for a moment, not sure what to say.

"We were," Cameron said simply, deciding that John's momentary pause followed with a lie would arouse suspicion. She wouldn't believe them if they said no.

"What was he doing?" she asked. "The... the last thing he said to me was that he had to do it – whatever 'it' *was. That the people he was working for weren't what he thought they were, and he was trying to put it right. What was he involved in?" The possibilities had been flying around in her head and causing her even more unrest, more sleepless nights and more tears on top of from his death alone. "He said he was going to put it right and then give it all up..."*

"We can't tell you," Cameron replied. It wasn't accurate: they could tell her but she wouldn't believe the truth and would cause her unnecessary distress, not to mention the risk of her alerting the authorities. She'd told John before she sometimes lied about important things: she deemed this to be one of them.

"Please," she grabbed John's jacket and stared at him, desperation in her eyes. "Tell me something. You were with him when he died,

weren't you." It wasn't a question as much as a statement; she could see it on his face.

He couldn't say nothing. She needed some kind of comfort, something to make sense of it. She'd never know exactly how her husband died – what little Cameron had found and told him said he'd died in a fire. Nobody had told her anything and John reckoned that would make the pain and loss even worse, not knowing why. "He helped us," John finally answered. "Your husband saved a lot of lives: probably mine, yours, theirs..." he tilted his head in the direction of the two girls who'd been with her before she approached him and Cameron, reckoning them to be Knowles' kids. He didn't add that Knowles also helped save several billion lives; she wouldn't believe it and it would only lead to more questions.

Cameron turned her head and saw the hidden expression in John's eyes. She felt his blood pressure increase slightly and knew he was growing nervous, guilty, speaking to Knowles' widow. "We have to go," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It was nice meeting you," John added, pushing Cameron's wheelchair away slowly, wanting to put some space between them and the funeral, hoping she didn't ask anymore questions they couldn't answer.

The four occupants of the car sat in silence in the dark, alone with their own thoughts, staring out the windows but keeping their heads down so as not to be seen by anyone walking by. The lights were all off, inside and outside the car, and that was how Sarah liked it. They were parked next to the kerb on an empty street, waiting for a call from John or Ellison. She fingered the key in the ignition, keeping it ready for when they had to move out, or if they had to drive away in a hurry. She had no pistol anymore but one of the M4s John had taken from the Kaliba complex was nestled between her seat behind the wheel and the door next to her. She looked down at the foot well

of Cameron's seat and saw the other rifle, taking up the space her nonexistent legs should have.

She glanced at Cameron, who stared forwards out the windscreen and gave no sign that she'd noticed Sarah looking out her. She knew better though; the cyborg would be well aware. The machine's words swirled around her head like a storm as she tried to make work out what she was going to do.

' *I love John... I won't leave him again.'* She hated the thought of it; her son in a relationship with Cameron. Sooner or later she'd rip his heart out of his chest; literally or figuratively, one of the two. After all he'd been through the latter would kill him just as much as the former. *It's not like I can do anything about it,* she mused, resignedly. Both John and Cameron had made that abundantly clear.

She continued to watch out the corner of her eye as Cameron picked up a newspaper from the floor, one Sarah had bought hours before while Savannah had her broken leg and arm treated in hospital. Inside the car was dark but Cameron had no trouble reading what was on the pages. "You were looking at property," she said.

"We need a place to rent," Sarah replied without looking at Cameron.

"Did you find anything?" Savannah leaned forward from the seat behind, struggling to move with two broken limbs. Her miniature self took up the back seat of the eight-seat Chevrolet Suburban, giving the elder redhead room to spread out and rest her injured leg.

"No," Sarah shook her head. "Too small."

Cameron scanned the pages and the various houses and apartments advertised on the pages. "Several have four bedrooms; that should be sufficient."

Sarah shook her head and gave Cameron a withering look. "There's six of us," she said.

"Yeah but I don't mind sharing with Little-Savannah," the elder Savannah replied. "And John and Cameron will be sharing anyway."

"No they won't," Sarah felt her blood pressure go up and she knew that she was turning red at the idea. "I can't tell John how to feel – or that you shouldn't feel – but I won't let it go on under my roof," she said adamantly.

"We don't have a house yet," Cameron said. "And John needs me; he can't sleep alone anymore."

"Nightmares?" Savannah asked knowingly. She'd had a few herself but then she had ever since she'd found out a liquid metal monster had killed her parents and pretended to be her mother. Since she'd seen the thing again in the hangar she'd had nightmares where it came to kill her next. A couple of times she'd managed to kill the thing; those were the good dreams.

"We both have nightmares," Sarah said. "He's always coped before."

Cameron's eyes lowered slightly and Sarah recognised a look of sadness etch into her face. "Not anymore. The last night he slept alone he had nightmares; he was shaking, crying."

"When was that?" Sarah asked, her voice softening. Why didn't he tell me? She asked herself. They both suffered from bad dreams about the machines, the future and the war; he'd never had a problem confiding in her before when they'd been bad, because it was something they shared.

"The night before you saw us exiting the shower together," Cameron answered. Immediately Sarah tensed up at the memory of seeing her son and the cyborg naked, minutes after the act.

"Why were you and John in the shower together?" Little Savannah asked, curious.

"To save water!" Sarah blurted before either Cameron or the elder Weaver defiled a little girl's mind with information she didn't need to know for another few years at least. "There's not much water in the desert, we had to ration it."

"Oh," Little-Savannah said, satisfied. She sat back in her seat and listened to the grown ups as they talked.

"John needs me," Cameron continued. "He doesn't need your permission; neither do I."

"Get this into your chip," Sarah seethed, wishing they'd put an end to it with Little-Savannah's innocent question. "You're not right for John; you're a machine. It'll all end in tears, or blood."

Savannah had heard enough of this. She respected and admired John's mother after seeing her in action, but she could be completely bigheaded at times, she'd noticed. *Probably where John gets his stubborn streak from,* she guessed. "What've you got against Cameron, anyway?" She asked Sarah, sitting upright as much as she could. "What's she ever done to you?"

"Tried to kill John, made him fall in love with her, and then left him: that's what," Sarah shot back without blinking. "Not exactly girlfriend material, and that's without the fact she's a machine. But that's not my point, what I mean is -"

"Well *John's* forgiven her for all that. Let it go or it'll kill you. Believe me." The best thing Savannah reckoned she'd ever done, in her own opinion, was to let it all go back in Monterey and leave the booze on the counter. She still carried the memories, and like scars they would fade but never disappear. She'd learnt there was no sense being stuck in the past; she wanted Sarah to see it too.

"How is it you're from the future and you're okay with Cameron?" Sarah asked Savannah, curious. "John's uncle never trusted her."

"Cameron never did anything to me," she shrugged. "Only one machine ever fucked me over," she couldn't help but glance at her little self in the back, glad she'd said her mother was dead. Better that than the truth. "I thought it was weird at first: I thought John was some kind of pervert, but I met more than a few of those and next to them a guy falling in love with a cyborg isn't that strange."

"What could be stranger than that?" Sarah asked.

"You don't want to know," Savannah said. Sarah glanced at her and saw something in her eyes, something she'd seen before in herself. She'd shacked up with plenty of guys solely because they had a skill they could teach John. She saw a mix of pain and anger in Savannah, at the memories deep within and knew better than to ask any further.

"Great," Sarah said. "But-"

"First of all I thought she was just metal. Then we went through hell together and I saw more, like John does." Sarah started to say something back, to get out what she'd wanted to say, but Savannah shook her head and cut her off.

"It's not the same." How could she explain it to her? How could she get a woman who was essentially a loner to understand the bonds built up when they were in hell? How John and Cameron were there when she'd lost Ellison, how they'd fought every moment, every inch they'd travelled, and done the impossible together: there was no way to get her to comprehend it.

"I get all that!" Sarah snapped, losing patience with being interrupted before she could get her point across. She turned from Savannah and towards Cameron. "I said before I'd try to accept it, I'd try to understand, and I am. I just don't want to hear you two going at it at night, or to see you coming out the shower again," she added the last part quietly so Little-Savannah wouldn't hear it. "I said I'd try but I don't want it shoved in my face, okay. It works both ways: I need time to get used to it," she sighed.

"Oh..." Savannah said, shrugging. She dropped the subject now that it had settled some, but someone wouldn't let it go.

"What's 'going at it' mean?" Little Savannah piped up in the back. She didn't like it when they talked about things she didn't understand and then wouldn't explain it to her.

"I'll tell you when you're older," Future-Savannah said. She turned back to Sarah. "Now that's settled; there's something they haven't told you so I might as well."

"What is it?" Sarah asked.

"Let me put it this way: we're going wedding dress shopping next week, want to come along?"

If Sarah's eyes were pistols Savannah would have been a bullet riddled corpse within seconds. She scrutinised the red haired young woman's face but she retained a serious expression. "You'd better be joking," she growled, her eyes narrowing.

"It wouldn't say no if John asked," Cameron added, sharing a look with Savannah. She'd observed the woman's humour in the future: she'd enjoyed teasing Ellison and John, and did so without changing expression or tone. She understood dry humour, though her attempts to employ it in the past hadn't been very well received. Savannah caught her look and grinned, knowing she'd gotten under the woman's skin.

Beep beep... beep beep... beep beep... "Thank God," Sarah muttered as she pulled the ringing cell phone from her pocket and pressed to answer the call and then keyed in the two numbers, hearing another two in return from the other end. "John?" she answered, listening to him speak on the line. "Okay; I'll pick you up in two minutes." She put the phone down and started the engine. To her immense relief neither Savannah nor Cameron said a word as she pulled out and joined back onto the road.

"Turn right down the next road and carry on," Coleman instructed Townsend, the Grey in the drivers seat pulled right and off the main road and onto a side street. Despite it being 2am and pitch black, there were several groups of teenagers milling around, a number of them wearing baseball caps underneath hoods over their heads, obscuring their faces from view even if it were daylight.

Despite living in a future where mankind was at war with machines, where even though they'd joined the winning side it had often been a precarious position, and being a human working for Skynet meant they were wanted men by the resistance, Townsend felt more nervous driving down this litter strewn side street than he'd been around the machines. A number of street lights were out, several more flickered erratically, and there was garbage strewn on the pavement, spilt out of a bin that undoubtedly some teenaged little bastard had kicked over for a laugh. The whole place smelt of neglect; kids wandering the streets, with parents who didn't know or didn't care where they were. They were surrounded by high tower blocks and low rent apartment buildings. This was where the poorest of LA lived, he reckoned; those with either low paid jobs or no jobs at all. Chances were the kids made money for their shiny new sneakers either by stealing from people or selling drugs. Ironically, he thought, it was these people – those who had learnt to live with nothing, and kids who'd learnt they couldn't depend on other people, even their own parents, for anything – who were better equipped to survive after the bombs fell. Very few middle-class Americans had lived to the end of the war. These kids already knew how to steal and scavenge, and fight for things they needed.

Still, even in the future, he'd become accustomed to a little luxury, more so since coming back to this time. He felt nervous driving an expensive car through such a run down neighbourhood, and not for the first time he wondered why they were here.

"Why the hell are we in Compton?" He asked. They drove on and their headlights illuminated graffiti tagged on the wall of an apartment block. He wasn't sure but he reckoned it was a gang sign. Whatever gang it was, they owned that building. He was glad when they drove straight past it.

"Because the safe house is in Compton," Coleman replied. "Keeping going straight and turn left at Eighteenth Street.

"I think what he means is," Pearce said, "why the hell did you make your safe house *here?"*

"Because no one would think to look here; that's why." Coleman smiled a little at his own ingenuity. Skynet had picked him partly because he was so resilient, because he always thought two moves ahead and because he was always thinking about what his enemy would be thinking. He'd been a keen chess player in his downtime and he'd always wondered who'd have won in a match between him and the great resistance general. The only shame about siding with Skynet is he'd never find out. "Not Connor, and certainly not Steroids and Baldy."

Under Coleman's instruction, Townsend drove on until they hit Eighteenth and he turned left. After fifty yards there was a back alley running through the centre of the block. Coleman told him to turn into it and keep going. They drove between buildings, passing detritus and debris. The place smelt like garbage and overcooked vegetables, and Pearce stared at a couple of hooded teenagers sat on a scruffy couch, in the middle of the alley. What the hell a couch was doing out in the open, he didn't know. He saw beer bottles strewn around and though he could detect a faint whiff of marijuana in the air. In the distance he could hear sirens wailing faintly but it was too far away to be a concern.

"Park here," Coleman told him, and once he'd put the car in place and turned the engine off, the lead Grey got out of the car. Once the other two were out he led the way towards the nearest building to their left; a decrepit apartment building that to Pearce's surprise

wasn't actually condemned. The place looked like it was about to fall apart but there were a number of lights on. People actually lived here.

The three of them entered the building, which was even worse on the inside than out. The elevator facing them was broken, with black and yellow tape crisscrossed in front of it, the words *Out Of Order* boldly imprinted along the length of it. "It didn't work when I set the place up, too," Coleman told them. Nobody cared about this building enough to fix it, certainly not the landlord, whom he'd only met once. He'd bought the apartment for a hundred grand – a pittance to him but he remembered the old man's eyes lighting up at the time as he'd handed over a thick envelope full of hundred dollar bills. Enough to ensure nobody ever set foot in the place after he'd got the keys – and promptly changing the locks afterwards.

Empty beer bottles were scattered on the floor as well as cigarette butts and discarded packs, and a few shopping bags had been left. There was graffiti on the walls going up the staircase that they started to ascend.

"How many floors up is it?" Townsend asked. Why the hell Coleman couldn't have picked somewhere nicer than this he didn't know. After living in a four hundred thousand dollar house in an upmarket neighbourhood for a number of years he'd become accustomed to living the life of a successful businessman, which on the outside was exactly what they appeared to be. Why anyone would choose to stay here – even if only for a short time – when they could afford elsewhere was beyond him.

"Fourth," Coleman replied. Once they got up to their floor he led them to the last door on the right from the stairs, and pulled out a key. He unlocked the door and stepped inside to Coleman's apartment.

"Nice place," Pearce rolled his eyes as he looked over the interior of the apartment. It was clean – it had that going for it at least – but it was basic, sparse. There were three rooms: the main living room-

cum-kitchen, with just a sofa, coffee table, and an oven with clean worktops and counters. The other two rooms were a bathroom and bedroom. It was small, it was Spartan, but to Coleman it was a secure home away from home; a place to hide out should the shit hit the fan. He firmly believed this qualified.

He went to one of the kitchen cupboards and opened the door. Inside was a small safe he'd installed inside, and he turned the combination lock and opened it up. Inside were stacks of hundred dollar bills, fifties and twenties, passports, papers, a fake driving license with his face on it, made out in the name of Patrick Stevenson from Kansas, and also a clear plastic bag. He pulled it out and held it up in front of the others. Inside it were several memory sticks and a thick wad of papers.

"Everything we need is in here," he explained. "All we need to start over again."

"What if Baldy and Steroids aren't in a forgiving mood even with those?" Townsend asked.

"There's a shotgun strapped under the coffee table, a pair of Berrettas under the sofa cushions, and I've rigged the front door up to the mains." He moved to the front wall between his apartment and the hallway, and held up a wire. He connected it to the door handle, flinching as a few sparks showered. "Now if they try to open the door without us shutting it off they're out for a-hundred-and-twenty seconds. Kitchen window leads to the fire exit and the car's ten feet from the bottom of the ladder. Spare keys are by the windowsill and inside the bag with the memory sticks are details for bank accounts in Geneva and the Isle of Man. The machines don't know about them, or about these," he handed them each a passport. Pearce flicked through his and saw a number of stamps already on it. According to his passport he'd already travelled to India, France, Germany, Japan, and South Africa in the past three years, and the name below his likeness was Sean Mason.

"It looks more authentic if it's been stamped," Coleman said. Most forgeries looked new, unused; one that seems to have been through a few airports would be less likely to be noticed. "If Baldy and Steroids are alive then it means Skynet is too. If they decided to kill us they'll only send one – the other will be with Skynet." The machines had always made it clear that one terminator remained with the AI at all times; they'd never fully trusted the humans, he knew. There was always the chance the resistance could have infiltrated the Greys – however unlikely – or that one of them had a change of heart and tried to kill the AI. Since one of their group had previously advocated resistance, he could see the machines' point.

"It'll be knocked out by the electric shock and we'll have two minutes to get out the window, down the fire escape, into the car and drive away. I'd recommend keeping your passports on you at all times in case we have to leave in a hurry."

Townsend looked down at his passport and noticed three others in the bag. Without looking at them he knew they'd have pictures of Nagase, Fischer, and Barton inside, with different aliases. He remembered Barton, the sixth man of their group: not long after they'd come back to the past he'd tried to rally the other Greys to resist and fight the machines. They'd immediately reported his defection to the three machines, Steroids had put a bullet in the back of his head and they'd dumped the body back into the desert. Not how Townsend wanted to go, so he could see why Coleman had taken such precautions. Just as the machines never truly trusted them, nor had he, it seemed.

Coleman took out a cell phone from underneath the kitchen sink, powered it up and waited for it to get signal. It was a cheap pay and go phone he'd picked up, paid with cash to avoid any trace, and programmed the numbers of the others, Baldy, Steroids, and also Colonel Schiff.

He put the pay and go phone into his pocket and also pulled out a laptop from a hidden compartment he'd made some time ago. When he'd had the time to do all this, Townsend and Pearce had no idea;

he'd spent as much time working on the project as they had, which was almost all their waking hours for the last seven years. He turned the laptop on and waited for it to boot up.

"How do we know if they're going to kill us or not?" Pearce asked. They could easily just come in and kill them all in a heartbeat.

Coleman hefted the plastic bag with the memory disks inside. "Insurance," he said. "If Skynet's still alive then they're powerful, but it's always been me who's been the face of this organisation. I've been the one who dealt with Schiff and the air force, not them. If they kill us then they'll have a hell of a time trying to broker a deal on their own." Pearce and Townsend both knew he had a point. As far as Schiff knew the two cyborgs were only in charge of security, and it was Coleman who was the *official* CEO of Kaliba Group. Neither Schiff nor anyone else in the military would negotiate any deals with what they perceived as glorified security guards. It had been a role they'd been happy to play, leaving the corporate stuff to the humans; an error the machines had never realised.

"First thing's first," Coleman said. When the laptop asked for a password he typed it in and the computer opened up its display window, revealing an image of the Grand Canyon as the wallpaper on screen. He selected *internet explorer* and logged onto his email account. In his inbox were a number of unread messages but the one that caught his eye was from Colonel Schiff's address, titled: *we need to talk.* He clicked on it to open the message.

Coleman,

What the hell's going on here? We need to talk, face to face and soon. I've been to the complex and seen some things that need explaining. Get in touch as soon as you get this message.

Col. Schiff.

"Shit!" Pearce growled, clenching his fists. "He knows about the machines; we're screwed."

"Maybe not," Townsend shook his head, sensing an opportunity. The others looked to him questioningly. "Think about it," he continued. "We've been offering him an AI, UCAVs more advanced than anything either in their current fleet or even on the drawing boards. What if we came clean about the machines, or partly at least? We've been working on the hyperalloys to build machines for some time now, we have the technology to create terminators – war machines decades ahead of anything even the most creative weapons engineers can come up with – the only thing we can't recreate are the chips so we'll make them remote controlled. Offer them terminators and they'll take them. With government funding we can create an army of machines, all with Skynet's programming of course."

Coleman nodded enthusiastically. "We program in a sleeper code to be activated coinciding with Skynet's nuclear attack: then when the bombs fall we've got an army of thousands of machines ready from the off." That was something else they could offer to placate Baldy and Steroids if they needed to, he thought. He'd take anything that they could use as a bargaining tool.

"But what if the Connors succeeded?" Pearce asked, not sharing their sentiments. "If Skynet's gone they're going to come after us. Both them and the machines could be looking for us right now."

"There's only one way to find out," Coleman shrugged. He flipped through the contacts on his pay and go phone until he found Schiff's number, selected it and pressed the call button. He put it to his ear and waited as it rang, listening to the shrill electronic beeping and silently willing for it to be picked up.

"Colonel Schiff. Who is this?" the colonel's voice sounded strongly over the line. He sounded distinctively unhappy to Coleman, and he wondered what exactly he had found?

"Colonel, its Mike Coleman. I just got your email. You said you wanted to talk?"

"Where are you?" Schiff asked, a hint of suspicion evident in his voice.

"We're at a safe location; things have gotten... complicated."

"You're telling me," the colonel replied gruffly. He knows, thought Coleman. He wasn't saying anything, but he knew something wasn't exactly kosher. *"I want to know what the hell's going on,"* Schiff continued. *"I've been to the complex, Coleman: everything's gone. There's more going on here than you're telling me, and I want to know what."*

"I can do that," Coleman nodded unconsciously despite the fact Schiff couldn't see him. "But not over the phone. Downtown: Los Angeles Theatre at eight o'clock tomorrow night." He disconnected the call before Schiff could make any kind of reply. He turned the phone off and took the battery out, placing them both into the plastic bag.

"Everything's gone," he said to Townsend and Pearce, echoing Schiff's words. He knew the colonel from the past months of dealing with him. He wasn't a man to exaggerate.

"What about Baldy and Steroids?" Pearce asked.

"He didn't say but I think we should assume if we can't contact them that they're gone too."

"Goddamn Connor," Townsend shook his head. "All our work's been for nothing."

"The hell it has!" Coleman snapped. He sat back down on the sofa and typed on the laptop again. "This is just a speed bump. No military project in history has ever arrived on time and on budget; this will just be the same."

"But we don't have Danny Dyson to build an AI anymore," Townsend reminded them.

"Then we go to our number two choice," Coleman said as he pulled the papers from the bag and flipped through them, glancing over each one until he found what he was looking for. He pulled it free from the rest and laid it on the table for Townsend and Pearce to see. In a header at the top of the page was a logo with three dots and the name *DAKARA SYSTEMS.* "Xander Akagi's *Emma* AI showed promise." If Danny had refused they'd have gone to him next.

"They didn't have the hardware," Townsend countered. "The AI was a bust."

"Only because they didn't have the money or the equipment," Pearce added.

"Which we can give them," Coleman said. "The AI program was good – not as good as Dyson's, but it'll do. We still have enough money and assets to continue the project. Contact Dakara Systems and tell them we want to make them an offer." The project would go ahead, no matter what. Connor could only slow them down but not stop them; it was inevitable. *You can't stop progress.*

Chapter 39

Really sorry this chapter took so long, to be honest I found this one the toughest to write by far. I hope the wait is worth it :-)

Scorching sunlight beat down on the arid desert plains, casting a punishing heat that forced every living thing underground to hide in the shade. Nothing moved over the rocky landscape except the shimmering of the air. Not even the slight breeze of the wind had any effect on the searing heat. A few sparse scrub bushes were the only visible signs of life for miles in every direction; any and all animal life had taken shelter underground, hiding to survive the blistering triple-digit temperatures.

A single road bisected the otherwise seemingly endless stretch of desert. The only manmade feature for miles to interfere with what otherwise would have appeared to be an unspoilt wilderness. On said road a single 4x4 rolled onwards, alone in the vastness of its surroundings.

Ellison stared out of the windscreen as John drove the Suburban along the desert road. A sign appeared and grew larger as they approached. "Maguire Gunnery Range," he read aloud, frowning. "What're we doing here?"

"Mopping up," John answered. They passed another sign informing them to turn off their air conditioning between eleven am and five pm to prevent their engines from overheating. He promptly ignored the advice; the thermometer read one-hundred-and-eleven degrees and there was no way he was going to roast to death.

"Anything more specific?" Ellison asked.

"A while ago Cameron, mom and me came here to stop a Triple-Eight named Carter from stockpiling a truckload of coltan and sealing it away for the future."

Ellison didn't get it. "Coltan?"

"It's one of the metals that make up their endoskeletons; it makes them more heat resistant. Carter stole the coltan, drove it into a fallout bunker on this range and sealed it tight. We took it back and sealed the machine inside behind thick blast doors. It's still there. That's what this is for," he patted the M-32 on the seat behind them.

"If it's sealed away then what's the harm?" Ellison asked. If it was trapped behind blast doors in the middle of nowhere then it wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. "They can't break down blast doors."

John shook his head. "I'm not worried about Carter breaking out; I'm worried about someone *letting him out."*

"Greys?" Ellison asked.

"Or the army if they decide one day to open up Depot 37." John didn't like to imagine that scene; some poor soldiers just doing their job opening up the blast doors to be slaughtered by a very pissed off terminator. He carried on driving down the narrow road and looked out for signs he was on the right track. He had a map that Cameron had marked out; she of course could remember its exact location from the last time when she and his mom had come to rescue him. He hadn't seen anything en route last time, having been stuck in the back of the truck when he'd arrived.

Finally they arrived at a turning and saw a sign indicating Depot 37 up ahead, two miles away. He veered right onto the new road and continued on, following the sign. He sped up and created a large cloud of dust in their wake, pressing harder on the gas as the depot came into sight in the distance and grew larger, filling up the

windscreen as they drew nearer. John parked up just outside, feeling a sense of déjà vu, the scene feeling to him much like when he'd approached John Henry's hangar in the future. He wondered how far away that facility and this depot were from each other; the distances had seemed larger in 2027.

As Ellison opened the door and got out the passenger side, John picked up the grenade launcher from the back seat and readied it before he exited the car. The heat instantly struck him hard as he stepped into the direct sunlight.

"I vote we do this job quickly," Ellison commented, feeling the heat almost as much as John as he transitioned from air conditioned, climate controlled car to the full force of the sun. The former future-saviour looked at the ex agent and suddenly found himself very glad he wasn't the only one who felt it.

He led the way into the front of the depot, finding it as empty as when they'd been there before. Inside the large hangar was empty, just wide open space the width of a football field. Cleary the depot wasn't in use at the moment and probably hadn't been since they were last here. If there had been, John knew he'd be looking at an open set of blast doors, shell casings scattered on the ground and bodies of dead soldiers strewn about. There was none of that, no sign of a struggle. "He should still be in there," he told Ellison. He opened up the box for the door controls, left unlocked by them the last time they'd been here.

He stepped away from it and walked towards the middle of the blast door, standing several paces back from the entrance. "Press the green button to open it," he told Ellison, shouldering the M-32. He took aim through the sights and tensed up, ready, as Ellison went over to the door controls and pressed the open button. A klaxon sounded as the doors rolled outwards slowly, loudly, and revealed the interior of the bunker.

John stared as hard as he could inside, searching for Carter. He saw nothing; the inside was pitch black barring the little bit of light that

came through from behind him; there were plenty of places to hide inside the bunker and clearly the T-888 had chosen to remain out of immediate sight, or at least John hoped.

"Do you see him?" Ellison asked, keeping his voice just above a whisper.

"Nothing," John replied softly. He started to sweat nervously under his t-shirt. He'd expected to see Carter stood like a statue right behind the door and now he wasn't there. Clearly Carter had learnt his lesson from before and was hiding inside somewhere, probably already awakened from standby mode and waiting to spring a trap.

"Do we go in?" Ellison asked.

"That's a death sentence," John muttered. "He's waiting in there."

"How'd you know?"

John shrugged. "It's what I'd do." He wasn't going to walk in there, in the dark, and expose himself to a terminator that could be hiding anywhere in the massive space inside, behind anything, out of sight. It could see in the dark and he couldn't. Even with the grenade launcher he didn't like those odds. Cameron had wanted him to wait until she was fixed up so she could go with him but after she'd told him about Coleman's emails and phone calls to Colonel Schiff and to Dakara Systems, he hadn't wanted to give them a chance to find new allies. If they knew about Carter or even just the coltan – and he had to assume they did – then another T-888 on their side was the last thing John needed.

Ellison pulled a 9mm from his waistband, walked closer to John and fired three shots through the bunker entrance. The rounds barked loudly in the confined space and he heard them ricochet off of something metal, the sound echoed throughout the interior. They waited for several seconds but there was no sound or movement in reply to his shots. Disappointing, he thought. He'd hoped gunfire

might've caught the machine's attention. "Now what do we do?" he asked.

"Draw it out," John decided.

"If shooting into the bunker didn't do it, what will?"

John smiled as he realised exactly what would. "Hey, it's John Connor: come and get me! I'm right here, *come on!* " He kept the M-32 tight into his shoulder and waited.

Carter surged forward, facial and voice recognition software identifying him as the intruder who'd locked him into the bunker and also the owner of the voice claiming to be John Connor. In the blink of an eye his primary mission, previously deemed a failure, was overridden by the standing orders to terminate John Connor on sight. The T-888 sprinted towards John out of the darkness with murderous intent at his prey.

John shifted his aim towards the short haired, BDU-clad cyborg and quickly fired twice before the machine made it out through the doors. Two grenades shot out from the launcher and smashed into Carter's chest with double-flash of fire and two loud explosions reverberated through the air, knocking the T-888 onto its back.

Before the sound had even died down John slowly advanced on the downed machine, keeping the launcher aimed squarely at Carter as the smoke and dust dissipated. He couldn't tell what the damage was in the dim light but he could see Carter slowly moving, trying to get up.

"Not going to happen," John said to it as he fired again, hammering Carter's back with a third round. His arms gave out from the force of the blast and he was smashed against the floor. John didn't bother hesitating. He fired the last three grenades methodically, taking aim each time and squeezing the trigger, resulting in three more explosions that shook the ground beneath them slightly. When the dust and smoke cleared John moved closer to inspect what was left.

A devastated wreck of twisted, snapped, and burnt metal lay unmoving on the ground. Half of its head was missing and a single glowing red eye flickered faintly before it faded into dull blackness. All its limbs had been torn off and smashed beyond repair; John was satisfied there was nothing to be salvaged from the remains of Carter, besides one thing. He walked up to the smashed wreck and saw two thirds of a chip lodged in what was left of the skull, exposed and within easy reach. He pulled it out, dropped it on the floor and crushed it under the sole of his boot. John dropped the M-32 to the ground; it was out of ammo and besides, he wouldn't need it anymore.

"Should we bury it, burn it or something?" Ellison asked, looking at the smoking ruins of what had once been one of the world's most formidable killing machines. It seemed wrong to just leave it out where someone – especially the army – could find it.

"No one's going to build Skynet from that," John gestured at the scrap metal on the ground. He went over to the door controls and pressed *close.* Slowly the doors rolled shut and sealed themselves, entombing the remains of Carter inside. "Let's get out of here," he said, turning away from the blast doors and heading out of the depot. He'd just obliterated one cyborg; now to make whole another.

To a man, the inside of Room 19 of the motel in Palm Springs was a gruesome scene right out of a horror movie. Blood stained the king size bed's white sheets, creating dark crimson patches throughout. Sharp tools dripped droplets of dark red onto one of the two bedside cabinets. A body lay on the ground, separated from the carpet only by the shower curtain, which had been carefully removed from the bathroom.

What had once been a pretty girl had been carved up like a Christmas turkey, her flesh cut and the body splayed open for anyone present to see inside of her. Any innocent bystander, any

ignorant person who'd stumbled across the body would have screamed in abject horror at the sight of it. The corpse was nude; her body split from groin to gullet and peeled wide open, her wrists the same from the crooks of the elbows all the way up to the palms of her hands, and her legs ended at the knees, amputated, leaving torn strips of flesh dangling and dripping blood into small pools on the shower curtain beneath her. Her eyes had been gouged out, leaving a pair of gaping, empty holes where they had once been.

To a man, or woman, who may have opened the door – perhaps the housekeeper come to clean and tidy the room and replace bedding and towels – the scene would appear the most bizarre, heinous, grizzly, sadistic ritual killing imaginable: a slaughter worse than anything the minds of Bundy, Gacey or Dahmer could have even imagined. To the occupants of the room, nothing could have been further from the truth.

John held the electric screwdriver carefully against Cameron's right knee, slotting the flat head into a notch in one of the locking cylinders in her new limb. "Ready?" he asked, looking up at her, meeting her gaze. They'd already done the hard work now; taking out her ruined cybernetic eye and replacing it with one from her other body had been the most difficult. Compared to that this was a cinch, but still he was nervous he'd make a mistake.

"Ready," she replied. Cameron reached down and wrapped her hand around his – the one holding the screwdriver, holding his grip steady. It was to reassure him more than anything else.

"Here goes," he breathed. Not so much nervous anymore; they'd spent the last eight hours on the bed, taking apart the spare body he and Ellison had dug out of the ground, harvesting the spare parts she needed, and replacing her damaged components with them. He started the screwdriver and pressed it against her knee as the head whirred loudly as it spun faster than even Cameron could track, turning the locking cylinder with it and tightening it. He loosened his grip on the trigger and slowed the rotation; unconsciously not

wanting to damage her despite the fact that intellectually he knew even an assault rifle would barely scratch the hyperalloy.

"That's good," Cameron said softly and smiled as the cylinder locked into place, securing the new knee into place. This leg had been the easiest to repair; her left leg had been so badly damaged that they'd had to disconnect the entire limb from the hip joint and replace it. The right one had been a clean slice just below the knee and had only required removal of the joint – a simpler matter. Terminators, being the most valuable assets Skynet had in its arsenal, had been built not only to be able to repair themselves but to make said repair and maintenance easy. Repairing a badly damaged limb required only to release the locking mechanisms securing the limb or joint in place and replacing with an intact part. Replacing her eye had been more difficult, requiring a steady hand from John and her patient, deliberate instructions. He'd been afraid of damaging it and leaving her half blind until she reminded him if he did go wrong her body double had a spare eye remaining.

The screwdriver stopped as the cylinder locked fully in place, preventing the power tool from spinning anymore. John pulled it away and placed it onto the bedside cabinet with the head facing away from them, then stood up, looking down at her sat on the edge of the bed. He held both her bloodstained hands in his equally crimson ones and squeezed. "You feel better?" he asked.

"Yes," Cameron answered honestly. Her diagnostic systems indicated that everything was fully repaired.

"A hundred percent?" He didn't want her to be anything less; if there was the slightest thing wrong with her, anything she needed, he'd do whatever it took to fix. And he knew she was aware of it.

"I think so." She stood up off the bed and put all her weight onto her two new feet. They held, as she knew they would, but she knew John wanted to see for himself. She jogged on the spot for several seconds and made a show of flexing and extending her knees, hips and ankles to show they were in working order.

"Good," he smiled, relieved. He couldn't help but look at her eyes; the contrast between chocolate and brightly glowing blue kept his gaze on her, especially the cybernetic eye. The fact it glowed reassured him it was working and she could see out of it. He sat back down on the bed and looked at the remains of her other body on the ground.

"What do you want to do with the rest of... you?" he asked her. Cameron sat down next to him, her arm brushed against his and their shoulders and hips pressed together. John knew that six months ago he would have been uncomfortable at her being so close, but not now.

"Harvest any spare parts I might need in future, and burn the rest," she said. It didn't need saying that they needed to destroy any evidence of the truth, anything that could start it all over again. They both knew.

John took out the sewing kit they'd procured. He looped a length of thread through the eye of a needle and gently pierced the skin around Cameron's knee with it. He threaded the thin strand through skin and muscle, and did the same to the skin on her lower leg. "Will this heal up okay?" he asked her. He knew her skin would regenerate in ordinary cases – it had already started to grow back over her exposed cheek and around the eye – but this was different – it was grafting one leg onto another and connecting two pieces of skin together.

"I'll have to keep my legs still," Cameron replied as John continued his sewing. He tried to be as delicate as he could but his stitches were clumsy and haphazard. "Here," Cameron reached forward to take the needle from him.

John pulled away, keeping it out of her reach. "I can do it." He wanted to do it for her; he knew she could do it better but that wasn't the point.

"Okay," Cameron relented. John held the needle against her skin again and pushed the sharp tip through. *"OW!"* she cried out and jolted in place, pulling away and looking at John with a pained expression on her face.

"Shit! I'm sorry Cameron, I..." John looked up and saw her head cocked slightly, a small, sly smile on her face; he realised exactly what was going on.

"Fooled you," her smile grew fractionally wider.

John shook his head but couldn't help smiling back. "Did Savannah put you up to that?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You two are gonna be trouble," he mock-sighed. At least until Savannah was up and around again. He'd never been that badly hurt before but he imagined how bored she must be, sat in a wheelchair and unable to do even the most basic things he'd always taken for granted.

"It does hurt though, right?" he asked. "A little bit?" She said she could feel but he wanted to understand exactly how, how it was different to the way he felt.

"I feel the needle pierce the skin and I know it's damaged. But it's different to how you feel."

That piqued his curiosity now and he couldn't resist quizzing her further. There was still a lot he didn't know about how she worked. "How's it different?"

"I sense damage but there's no reflex to stop it like with you. It just makes me aware of injuries."

"So..." John started, thinking he had the gist of what she meant. "Pain doesn't hurt, like it does with us?"

She didn't know if he'd be able to understand it fully; organic beings felt pain for a reason, to make them averse to harming themselves accidentally or to force them to remove themselves from danger, in a similar way to fear. It wasn't the same for her. "In a way," she replied. She thought up an analogy she thought was more accurate. "You've been in fist fights before," she said, knowing the answer.

"Yeah, plenty," John had gotten in fights every day in Garberville with the hippy kids; the fact they were new age lefty weirdo types had made most of them fairly one-sided but there'd been a few big guys who knew how to throw and take a punch, not exactly in the spirit of their parents' ideals.

"When you're in a fight and someone hits you, you don't notice the pain because of the adrenaline. It's similar to how I sense it; I'm aware of it but it doesn't affect me." She knew it was a very basic explanation and not precise but she'd learnt that simple was always better.

Cameron let John continue sewing the skin of her upper and lower leg together and patiently sat in place as he stitched up the lengthy incision along the outside of her thigh on the other leg, where she'd cut all the way down from her hip and peeled it open to remove the entire leg joint. Pistons and servos had been reconnected and all that was left to do was the skin. John worked slowly, carefully; he was doing it for her so he wanted to do it right.

Once he'd finished, her body was a mass of burnt skin and stitches. Cameron had cut away most of the blackened skin and already new flesh had started to grow through. Her face was still burnt bright red but most of the blisters had started to shrink. She knew her eye would grow back within a week, but for the meantime Sarah had bought her a pair of sunglasses to wear if they went out in public. None of it mattered to her, or to John, though. He was just glad she was okay again.

He lay down on his back on the bed and a moment later she leaned back and joined him. Months ago when they'd laid on a bed together

he'd been uncomfortable with her so close, their bodies touching on the small single mattress he'd had back then. Now it was a double bed in their motel room and they had plenty of space, but they still remained in contact in the centre. It didn't just feel comfortable now; it felt natural to John.

He reached down his side until he found her hand, and entwined his fingers with hers. Their palms pressed together lightly and he leaned his head towards her, Cameron did the same until they faced each other. "They're still out there, aren't they," he said to her. "The Greys, the guys who hired Danny and Knowles and built Skynet: they could start it all up again, couldn't they?"

"It's possible," Cameron replied. It wasn't likely, however; before erasing all the data pertaining to Kaliba she'd memorised details of accounts and facilities tied to the company, as well as personal bank accounts in the names of the surviving Greys. She'd emptied all the accounts, both personal and business. They had nothing left. "I'm looking for them," she added as she rolled her head slightly towards him, inching their faces closer together. "I'll find them."

John looked up at the ceiling as he felt the warmth of her forehead against his. He leaned into her slightly and closed his eyes. He breathed in slowly and felt himself starting to relax just a little bit. There were still Greys out there, still loose ends that needed to be taken care of, but for now they could take a little time to rest and recover, to let their wounds heal before they moved on.

While John rested Cameron's mind was hard at work. After reducing Kaliba's assets to crippled, debt-ridden disasters, she turned her attention to locating the Greys. She'd learnt all of their names from Skynet's database in the Kaliba complex, but she knew that after the attack it was likely the surviving founders of the company were in hiding. She operated under the assumption that they had assets she didn't know about, potentially even new identities, but that they would continue their mission to create Skynet. Their best chance to do so would be through the US military, and Colonel Schiff was in charge of the air force's AI acquisition project: he was her lead.

She scoured his emails and saw one to Coleman's address, and smiled slightly. Good; he was still contacting the Greys. But there had been no online reply. Instead she perused through all the data she could find regarding the colonel until she found his cell number. She scoured through his records of sent and received calls, and concentrated on those made after the email he'd sent to Coleman's address. She found seven received calls since the time and date of the email and traced their owners, identifying all but one of them, which was an unregistered cell phone on a pay and go contract.

"I have them," Cameron announced. John's eyes instantly snapped open and he immediately turned onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at her with the same determined stare she recognised when he'd resolved to rescue Sarah and Little-Savannah.

"Where are they?"

"I'm trying to locate it," she said. She had the number and the phone was on, meaning she could trace it, but she needed to triangulate its exact position. The same as she'd done in Regent-Burke's office, Cameron accessed satellites in orbit and used them to interrogate cellular towers throughout the United States. Within seconds she'd narrowed it down to California as she locked onto the first cell tower, then Los Angeles County as she got the second.

"They're in Compton," she told John. "I have the address." Cameron also traced the number's activities by hacking into the cell provider and discovered something interesting. "They're in contact with Dakara Systems."

"Son of a bitch," John sat upright and punched the mattress. They were at it again; they just wouldn't give up, ever. "This has to stop," he growled, a new resolve flowing through him, steeling him. He turned to Cameron with a calm, detached look on his face, hiding the anger that simmered beneath the skin at Coleman and the other Greys. It couldn't go on anymore. Cameron got up to her feet – happier now she was whole again – and stood facing him.

"It will," she promised him, catching his eyes with her own calm, even stare. John held out a bag with a clean set of clothes in it; jeans, a black t-shirt, and black boots.

"Get dressed," he said, handing the bag to her. He moved over to the door and pulled it open a crack, stepping in the way so nobody looking in would see Cameron with more stitches in her than Frankenstein's monster, or the remains of her spare body. "Bring the car around and put everything in the trunk; I'll tell mom, Ellison and Savannah we've found Coleman."

Tonight it would all end. He'd killed people before and always regretted it: Sarkissian, the tunnel rat in the future, the mercenaries they'd fought against; but Coleman and his cronies: *no chance.* He wasn't going to lose a minute's sleep over them once they were gone.

He left Cameron to clear up the room and moved to the door next to their one. He and Cameron had taken a room to themselves, and he'd noticed his mom's look as they'd done so. She clearly still wasn't too happy about it but she'd said nothing. She needn't be worried; sex was the last thing on John's mind right now.

As he and Cameron had one room to themselves, Ellison, Sarah, and the two Savannahs had shared another with two king-sized beds between the four of them. One between three, he corrected himself; Savannah's injuries meant she needed the space of one bed to herself; anyone accidentally rolling on her leg or arm would be sheer agony for her. Whatever arrangements they'd made in the room, he knew they were all cramped and impatient, and eager to get the hell out.

He knocked twice and in seconds it opened up. He stepped through, past Ellison and walked into the room. Sarah sat on a chair and both Savannahs, little and big, were on one of the two double beds, the latter still in plaster cast. The wheelchair was folded up against the wall and unless someone got it out for her and brought it to the bed she was immobile.

"Cameron found the Greys," he said as Ellison closed the door and shut them all in the motel room. "We're going after them."

"Where are they?" Sarah asked, already getting up out of her chair. She couldn't help but wince as the movement pulled on her stitches and made the wound burn.

"Compton. We're moving out now, should be able to get there in a few hours, then we'll deal with them."

"Got a plan?" Ellison enquired.

John just shrugged. "We kill them."

That earned a small grin from Savannah. "Simple," she said. "I like it."

"We're not killing anyone," Ellison protested suddenly, causing three pairs of eyes to glance at him in confusion.

"They deserve it," Savannah growled.

"We can't let them live," Sarah added. "They won't stop; they'll keep trying." She thought back to Winston; she had to kill him twice to stop him, and he'd just been a hired gun for Kaliba: the top guys from the future, Coleman and co, would be even worse.

Ellison just shook his head adamantly. *"Nobody* is going to die," he flicked his eyes towards Little-Savannah before he turned to her. "Nobody," he repeated. She'd not long been told she'd lost her mother, only months after her dad had been killed in a helicopter crash. He didn't want her exposed to any more death.

Savannah caught on to what he meant and instantly regretted saying anything, knowing she'd probably just added another item to the pile of things that could make the little girl as fucked up later in life as she was.

"We don't really mean *kill,* kill," she said to her past self. "You know when your mom and day say they're going to kill someone, but they don't really mean it."

"Right," John added, also understanding. "When you've been bad they might say it out of anger. These guys are really bad. We're just going to have a... *chat* with them about all the bad things they've done, make sure they're not going to do it again."

"Leave us here," the elder Weaver suggested, gesturing to her and Little-Savannah. "I can't help you in Compton: leave us here and pick us up when you're done."

"You're sure?" John asked. He knew she was injured but still, she'd never been one to back out of a fight. He could see where she was coming from though; she'd just be a passenger in the car, taking up space. She couldn't help them and she wouldn't even see anything. Sarah was still wounded but she could drive at least. Right now, as much as both he – and he knew her – hated to admit it, she'd be little more than a fifth wheel on this mission.

"Yeah," Savannah said. "She can keep me company."

Sarah couldn't help but smile a little at the thought of Savannah hanging out with... herself. "Let's go," she said, echoing John's feelings on the subject. Ellison led the way out of the room, followed by Sarah.

"Come here," Savannah said to John, beckoning him with her good hand. John stepped across the room until he was standing at the edge of her bed. "We need to talk," she turned to her miniature self. "Give us a minute," she said. The smaller redhead looked at them for a moment before she too headed out the door, leaving John alone with Savannah. As soon as the door clicked shut the redhead looked up at John.

"Coleman's the guy who made Skynet in my time, right?" she asked. Sometimes she couldn't get her head around all this different

timeline crap, it was pretty confusing.

John nodded. "Yeah, this is the same timeline; in your future they built Skynet."

"Means they killed Ellison as much as that HK did," she said flatly. She reached for a combat knife with her good hand and held it up to John by the blade, offering him the handle as their eyes locked together, both sporting serious, intense expressions on their faces. "Make it slow," she said, pushing the knife into his grip. "Make him suffer." She felt all the pain, the loss and the anger returning to her again.

Coleman was the cause of it all. The HK had killed Ellison, and Skynet had created and programmed the HK. Skynet was gone now but not its creator. Back in the future, camped out in an OP a mile from Serrano, she remembered making plans with Ellison; what she'd do with her new life once she'd made it back. She'd assumed through the whole thing that he'd be there with her. And although he was in a fashion, it wasn't the same. This Ellison wasn't the Ellison she'd grown up with – he was the same man but he hadn't gone through seventeen years of hell with her. Her past self needed him, *her* Ellison was gone; hopes for a bright and shining future were now dulled with his loss, and she regretted that she couldn't be there to personally avenge him.

"I will," John nodded solemnly and wrapped his fingers around the handle, taking the knife from her. He could see the pain beneath the surface. He'd seen Savannah change since they came back; she'd grown, let go of most of the anger that had eaten away at her over Weaver and of course, losing Ellison, but he could see some was still there. She wanted to move on, but clearly the fact that the bastards ultimately responsible were still alive meant she couldn't do that. When he thought about it he wasn't sure he'd be able to either. Derek – both his and the future one – Kyle, Allison, Mac and everyone else in their camp had died for him, had died *because* of Skynet and the Greys. It wasn't enough that they'd stopped it from

happening, they needed closure, retribution; he realised he needed it as much as Savannah did.

A light blue Chevrolet pulled into the parking lot of the Los Angeles Theatre, narrowly missing the fender of another car as it swung into the turning. Schiff pressed down on the brake as he swung the car between the white lines of a bay and turned the engine off once he was in position. Despite only wearing jeans and a shirt, and the temperature outside only hitting seventy-five, he realised he was sweating profusely, and he knew exactly why.

He hadn't yet filed his report of the incident. The AI project obliterated, billions of dollars of tech down the drain, twenty-two UCAVs destroyed as well as four Raptors shot down by the state-of-the-art drones, which had crashed somewhere in the vast Sierra Crest. He'd left the live machine out of his report; even with a dozen airmen there who'd seen the same thing, there was no hard evidence. The dead machine had just been an empty metal shell, nothing worth studying and not enough to prove what he'd seen. They'd think he was crazy and he'd be out on a medical discharge and sectioned in the nuthouse so fast his head would spin.

Deep down though, he knew that wasn't the entire truth. Yes, he'd be labelled as crazy by everyone, lose his career and his pension if he'd told them what had really happened, but there was more to it than that. *The android:* just thinking back to the ravaged face of the machine, dark grey, bloodstained metal exposed beneath the skin. The remaining eye staring at him as the Dragonflies had hovered menacingly above. The mental image of the machine and its glowing blue eye still chilled him to the core.

'Do you have any idea the damage you've done?'

'I can do a lot more.'

He'd barely slept in days since coming back from the complex; the android and the Connors had taken out a top secret facility and fought their way through a highly trained, heavily armed security force; it wouldn't take much for them to find him, and the thought of it scared him shitless.

Because of his sleepless nights and dreams of a brunette machine with glowing eyes and an angry John Connor bursting into his room at night and executing him, it had almost come to him as a relief when the Joint Chiefs had seen the cost of the Connors' attack and decided immediately to terminate the AI program – with billions of dollars down the drain they weren't about to throw good money after bad – because now the project had been abandoned he hoped he might be able to stop going to bed with a gun on his bedside cabinet every night.

Even with the AI project shelved indefinitely, he wanted to see Coleman again. John and Sarah Connor, the AI, the machine remains he'd found, and the android girl: something had been going on and he wanted answers, and he wanted to hear them from Coleman himself. He wanted to make sense of the catastrophe that would probably cost him his career.

Schiff got out of the car, closed the door behind him and walked across the parking lot towards the front of the theatre, all the time watching out for Coleman or his associates to appear. There was nothing big on at the theatre, nothing to draw a crowd at least. A few people milled about outside, some smoking, others talking on cell phones.

He stood on his own next to the front wall, ignoring the smokers and the chatting groups, and swept his head from left to right, again looking for any sign of them.

"Where the hell are you?" he muttered. He had no idea what they were playing at, why Coleman was being so secretive, but it wasn't a good sign. He was hiding from something, probably from the Connors and their android. The group had attacked, very

successfully, their facility and he reckoned they would probably come to mop up what was left. Schiff decided he didn't particularly care what happened to Coleman now; he just wanted some answers, some kind of reasoning behind everything he couldn't piece together. He wanted the truth.

Computers were a mystery to Savannah Weaver. She'd used them before of course, long, long ago when she was a child. She remembered the games online she'd played and that she'd used them at school. The last time she remembered being on a computer she'd been caught by her teacher, chatting to John Henry. After the bombs fell there was no power, no internet, and so no computers – except maybe in government facilities before they'd either been overrun or simply ran out of electricity to run them.

The last time she'd used a computer had been with Ellison, weeks before they'd found John. Though ripping the insides out and lighting a small bonfire within the confines of the casing probably wasn't what its designers had had in mind when they'd manufactured the thing.

Now she sat in an internet cafe adjacent to the motel they were staying in, seated at a desk with a flat screen in front of her, a mouse, and a keyboard, and little idea of what to do. She glanced from the corner of her left eye at her younger self, taking up the seat next to her and looking intently at the screen. Of course, when she was a kid she, like other children, had taken to computers like a duck to water. Now they were foreign to her.

"Do you want me to help?" Little-Savannah asked.

For a moment she found it tempting to let her miniature give her a hand. "I'll be okay. Have you got the money?" she asked.

"Sure," the little redhead pulled out a twenty-dollar bill from her pocket that Ellison had given them just before they'd left.

"Go and pay for a couple hours on this thing, can you?"

"Can I have a coke?" the younger asked.

"Only if you get me a coffee – large," Savannah replied. She watched her younger self go up to the counter and hand the guy manning the desk the money and ask for their drinks. "We'll need chocolate to go with that!" she shouted out to her double. One thing she remembered well from the past, one thing she'd looked forward to ever since the possibility of coming back had entered hers and Ellison's mind, was eating all the things she hadn't done in years, one of them being chocolate.

She turned to the computer and with her good arm worked the mouse. It didn't help that she had to use her left to control it and she was right handed; it made what was already an awkward task even more difficult. It didn't matter, she thought, she'd adapt. She hadn't survived nuclear war and global genocide against people, brought John back and prevented the birth of Skynet, just to be beaten by a PC. She was a survivor, and a great part of that was being able to adapt. And she knew that she'd have to adapt again, learn to live in this new world, and that meant learning how to use a computer.

Within a minute the screen flashed, became brighter, and dialogue box opened up to inform her she had two hours' worth of credit on the computer, starting now. She clumsily manoeuvred the mouse until the cursor was on the cross icon on the corner of the box and clicked it, making it disappear and revealing the blank white background with the *Google* logo and a single small box to type in.

"I remember this," she said, feeling a little more encouraged. She thought back to her discussion with Ellison, laid on their bellies beneath a tarp, overlooking Serrano Point and being pelted with constant rain. He'd been afraid for her in this new world, what she'd do with herself. She recalled her telling him her ideas for what she

might do with the rest of her new life, and slowly, using only the forefinger of her plaster encased hand and arm, typed, one key at a time. *Police careers.*

The screen changed and revealed a long list of results, causing Savannah to blink and sit back slightly in her wheelchair. "Over one-hundred-million results," she muttered, taken aback at the multitude of sites there was. *A hundred million: how the hell did Cameron do this so quickly?* She'd seen Cameron search for and find what she wanted online in only seconds and wondered how she could do it.

Unperturbed, she skimmed over the results on the first page and saw plenty of articles about police recruitment, and an official LAPD recruitment site. She shook her head; not what she wanted. She'd spent most of her life post J-Day out in Mexico, in the countryside, the desert, and out in the open, isolated and away from civilisation. She'd also spent plenty of time in cities though; Cancun, San Diego and Lo Angeles among them, and she'd decided a long time ago that she much preferred small towns in the country to big cities. She wasn't comfortable in LA; she hated the size, how crowded and busy it was. She could see why Sarah liked it; it offered anonymity to a person who just wanted to keep their heads down and blend into a crowd. But now they didn't have to live like that and she wouldn't.

She scrolled down and found a number of other police recruitment sites as well as news articles and newspaper columns on careers in the police. None of it was what she wanted.

Little-Savannah returned with a can of coke for herself and held out a large cup of steaming coffee to her. She took it with her good hand and put it on the desk, it was too hot to drink right now. "Thanks," she said as the smaller Weaver sat on the swivel chair next to her. "What did you get?"

She held two orange packets in her hand, put one on the table and tore open the other before giving it to her older counterpart.

Big-Savannah took it and pulled out one of the three small chocolate pieces held in a paper cup. With her good hand she brought one of them to her nose, sniffed the chocolate and caught a whiff of something she couldn't quite put her finger on. The orange wrapping was familiar but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Try it," Little Savannah looked up at her expectantly. She'd bought it especially for her. Big-Savannah put it to her lips and sucked it out of the cup, bit into it and held fast as the small treat rested on her tongue and for the first time in as long as she could remember, she tasted chocolate. The rich, sweet sensation washed over her taste buds and she couldn't help but moan a little in delight. It took a few seconds for her to realise this wasn't normal chocolate. There was something else mixed in with it; rich, sticky, not as sweet as the chocolate...

"Peanut butter cups?" she looked at Little Savannah as it finally came back to her. The diminutive Weaver nodded enthusiastically as she opened up her own packet and ate one, enjoying the taste but clearly not quite as much as her elder self. Big-Savannah continued. "I loved these when I was a kid," she smiled, remembering how her mom – her *real mom* had bought her one a week as a treat.

"I know," Little Savannah said, with a glint in her eye that wasn't lost on her older self.

Does she know? Big-Savannah started to feel slightly uncomfortable now; she'd never wanted the kid to know about it, she wanted to keep the future a secret, protect her from all that shit now they'd nipped it in the bud. Skynet wouldn't ever wage war on the world and there was no need for Little Savannah Weaver to know the horrors of the future she'd faced, the things she'd seen and done, and had done to her, there was no reason to tell her anything more about the machines than she already knew.

"Mommy used to buy me one every Saturday," Little-Savannah said. "Then she stopped after daddy died," she added sadly. "She said chocolate's bad for you, she made me eat vegetables."

That'll be the liquid metal bitch, Big-Savannah thought wistfully, her good fist unconsciously clenching. She remembered that well; one of her weekly treats had been taken away only days after her father had been killed, coinciding with her 'mom' turning cold and emotionless.

"What're you looking at?" Little-Savannah gazed at the screen and read the different headings for each result. "You wanna join the police?"

"I'm thinking about it," she said. "Want to help?"

Little-Savannah took the mouse and clicked onto one of the headings for San Diego PD, opening up onto their recruitment site. She looked at the options and then pressed for information for joining. A list of requirements for applicants came up and Big-Savannah winced as she read it. "Try another one," she said. Little-Savannah went back to the search results and clicked onto another site, this one for LAPD. Future-Savannah had no intention of joining the LAPD or any forces in the state, even, but it gave her a feel for what they'd all be looking for. The same list of requirements came up: qualifications she didn't have, a impeccable personal record – that one was a problem as she didn't even exist other than as the seven year old girl sat next to her; and references to prove character, as well as employment records that she didn't have.

"I never graduated from high school," she said, starting to feel dejected. "Or any of that other stuff." Ellison had mentioned putting her through school, giving her a shot at a better life, but now she realised that might well have been a pipe dream. He'd made sure she could read even after J-Day by finding her books, he'd kept her on the ball and she knew she was far from stupid, but without any real qualifications and her only experience being in fighting, she wasn't sure what she could really do.

Her smaller self saw the disappointment on her face and she felt bad as well. She wanted to help but she didn't know what to do. Mommy would have known; she was really smart, she'd always known what

to do. Then she remembered someone else who was really smart, too. "Ask Cameron," she offered. "She's really smart." She was a robot; she could do anything, right? Little-Savannah was sure Cameron could help."

"You're not just a pretty face, are you?" Savannah grinned, looking down at her smaller self. Little-Savannah had a good point, she realised: they'd need to get new IDs anyway and she reckoned Cameron would be the best person for the job; why not throw in a few fake high school diplomas in as well?

"When you and Sarah were taken," she changed the subject. Sarah hadn't said what they'd done to her in there but it couldn't have been pretty. "Did they do anything to you?"

Her face fell as Little-Savannah nodded, a look of sadness and pain coming over her face as she remembered it all. "They hurt us," she said quietly, her eyes starting lowering to the ground. The blank face of the big bald man staring down at her still scared her. "I don't want to talk about it," she added meekly.

Future-Savannah grit her teeth and clenched her fist again, angry at what they'd done to a child she saw almost as her little sister now. Assholes; how the fuck could anyone torture a little kid? "Do me a favour," she said, lifting her good leg up out of the chair slightly and twisting her body so her thigh was facing Little-Savannah. "Get the phone out of there." Without a word of reply, the smaller Savannah complied and pulled the phone out of her thigh pocket. "Get yours out, too." She did just that and handed them both to her elder counterpart.

"What now?" she asked.

"You put my number into your phone and then put yours into mine: if you need to talk about it or anything else, just call me."

Taking both phones, Little-Savannah typed on the keys with a speed that the elder one had never seen before and thought there was no

way she could do it herself. She felt like an old woman confronted with technology too modern for her – though it was the opposite case for her. "You don't have to worry about them anymore though," she added reassuringly. "They won't hurt you again." She knew John and Cameron would see to that.

When Little-Savannah was done she handed the cell phone back to her future self, who took it in her casted hand and used the good one to drink her coffee and took a sip as she looked down at the very short contact list. *Mini Me.* She choked on her coffee in shock and forced herself to swallow it down, very nearly spraying it across the computer screen. "What the hell?" she stared down at the cell phone again, completely taken aback by the two-word name on the contact list. She put down her coffee and grabbed Little-Savannah's phone to check what she'd put on her own. The words *Big Me* stood out, next to a number she guessed belonged to her phone. "You know who I am?"

She was answered by Little-Savannah nodding emphatically. "John went to the future and came back with Cameron and you. You look like me." She'd watched her older self and had seen the freckles on their faces were the same. Their hair was the same, and their teeth were the same. And they both loved peanut butter cups.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't know," Little-Savannah shrugged sheepishly.

"Don't ever tell anyone," Future-Savannah told her seriously. "Ellison, John, Cameron and Sarah know, and that's it. Promise me you won't tell anyone. Or about Cameron either; no one can know she's a cyborg."

"I promise," she replied. She didn't know what a cyborg was; she thought it must be another word for robot. "Cross my heart."

Future-Savannah looked down at her and smiled, patting her on the shoulder. "Good girl; it'll be our secret."

The younger Weaver girl looked up to her older self nervously. She was keeping a secret for the bigger Savannah. "Does that make us friends?" she asked. The question touched Future-Savannah, she hadn't been expecting that. Really they were family, she thought; an insane, messed up family, but still. They didn't really have too many people to depend on. She wasn't sure what to say at first, or what she'd be to the kid in future.

"Yeah," she said. "We're friends." She knew her little self needed more than just a friend, needed family more than anything but she wasn't the best one for the job. She swore she'd be there for the kid though, whatever happened she'd be make sure that Little Savannah Weaver was okay, and she knew the best person for the job.

Ellison stepped towards the entrance to the apartment building and held the door open for Cameron, following after her and stepping inside the foyer. Despite it being dark outside and the fact they were now indoors she wore a pair of sunglasses to hide her machine eye. Straight in front of them was a corridor, with front doors to apartments on either side. Strewn across the floor were discarded cigarette butts, dropped by people who clearly didn't give a shit about their surroundings and had no pride in where they lived. Chances were, Ellison thought, that people just saw the state of it and thought their own mess couldn't make it any worse. The smell of stale liquor spilt on the ground and the pungent scent of weed filled his nostrils.

"Nice place," Ellison commented sardonically. "Why would they hide here?" If they had millions if not billions of dollars in accounts all over the world, why were they sitting in such squalor?

"We'd never think to look for them here," Cameron replied. "They sided with Skynet to survive and for an easier life; we'd expect them to keep some luxuries." Coleman was clearly a strategic thinker: he'd

anticipated what people looking for him would think and had done the opposite of what anyone would expect.

She looked around at the squalid building as they walked towards the elevator. Whitewashed walls peeled plaster and were covered in graffiti. She could smell overcooked vegetables and she heard noises from various apartments on their floor. Most were sounds from televisions but a few were people talking in their homes. A baby in one of the apartments cried loudly and she heard the mother trying to calm it down.

"People lived in worse than this in the future," she told Ellison. "Many people lived underground in the dark." She thought it likely that Derek, Kyle and Allison would have eagerly accepted living in one of these apartments.

The pair of them marched through the passageway towards the elevator. To one side of it, at the right hand side wall, were steps leading upwards and disappearing behind the shaft sticking out from the wall. Two teenagers sat on the ground and passed a large joint between them, laughing and chattering about something Ellison didn't bother to listen to. Cameron pressed the ground floor button for the elevator and waited.

"I wish we didn't have to kill them," he said to Cameron, already regretting what they came here to do.

She understood how he felt. He valued others' lives even more than most humans did. "They're too dangerous: if we let them go they'll build Skynet again." She'd learnt over the past few months that people's lives weren't expendable assets – the value of human life, as John would have said. But she'd also learnt that some were more valuable than others, and cold hard machine logic was still a part of her: three men dead to prevent billions was an obvious choice to her. Probably even to most humans, she thought, if they had all the information she, John and Ellison possessed regarding their targets; if they knew what the three Greys had been planning.

She pressed the button again, noticing that the LED light was broken, and continued to wait. The two teenagers laughed louder and stared at the Cameron and Ellison.

"Is something funny?" Ellison asked, looking straight at them.

"Elevator's broken," one of the kids chuckled, blowing out a puff of smoke towards them. His attention turned to Cameron and he eyed her up and down. She was pretty, minus the scars that lined her face. *And why is she wearing sunglasses at night?* "What happened to you?" he asked.

"Car accident," Cameron said. She stepped towards the teenager. "There are three men living in one of these apartments, which one?"

"What're you, cops?" the other one eyed her suspiciously.

"We don't know any men," the first one said cockily, taking another drag from the joint.

Ellison frowned in disgust at the weed the kid was smoking. "We didn't even tell you what they look like."

"We don't care," he replied, stepping up to Ellison and exhaling a puff of smoke straight into his face. Ellison coughed and spluttered uncomfortably, causing both kids to laugh until Cameron gripped the smoker by the neck and picked him up off the ground.

"What the fuck?" the kid cried out in horror and dropped his joint to the ground. The other one ran to his aid but Cameron snapped up a side kick and caught him in the gut, knocking the wind out of him and doubling him over. He groaned in agony and staggered backwards, clutching at his stomach.

Cameron glared at the first kid through her sunglasses and squeezed his throat slightly, not enough to cut off his air, just to scare him further. "There are three white males who arrived here in the past two days, mid forties to mid fifties. Where are they?"

The one bent over took a step towards them. Cameron clenched her fist, ready to strike him again but he immediately put up his hands in surrender. He looked scared, so she hesitated. "There's three guys on the fourth floor," he said. "Ain't ever seen them before."

"What room?" Ellison asked.

"Don't know," he replied. Cameron let go of the kid she was holding and he dropped to the ground on his ass. Without a word of thanks she turned from them and started up the stairs. Ellison noticed the joint on the ground was still smoking from the lit end and crushed it under his shoe. *Filthy habit.*

"That was my last joint," the teenager mumbled. Now what was he meant to do for the rest of the night? "Assholes!"

Both Cameron and Ellison ignored his angered shout as they made their way up the staircase. Cameron pulled out her cell phone as they ascended past the first floor and up towards the second and selected *1* on her speed dial. It rang twice before he answered.

"Cameron?" John's voice sounded in her ear.

"Fourth floor," she told him. "We don't know which apartment yet, I'll find out soon."

"Keep me posted." He hung up and the phone went dead. She wasn't alarmed by his abruptness; they were on a mission, there was no time for niceties and both knew it. They continued up the flights of stairs up to the fourth storey. There were eight apartments on this floor – four either side of the corridor, with the stairs and elevator shaft in the middle. Any one of them could be their target. Cameron slowly walked down one half of the hallway and listened intently, then turned around when she reached the end and did the same to the other side.

"I can't hear them," she said to Ellison. There was noise coming from four apartments on the floor but she heard nothing to distinguish

them from anyone else. In the past she'd have simply kicked every door down until she found them but that wasn't an option; they couldn't afford any witnesses.

"What now?" he asked. "If we start knocking on doors it'll give them warning."

"I have a better idea," Cameron told him. She pulled out her phone again and dialled the number she'd isolated from Colonel Schiff's records. She listened carefully and waited for the sounds of a ringtone. Moments later she heard an electronic *Nokia* tone beeping from last room to their right, at the rear of the building. Instantly she hung up before anyone could answer and her fingers flew rapidly over the keys of her cell as she fired a rapid text to John.

Apartment 408, rear of the building at the corner. Cameron and Ellison then stalked silently to the door of the apartment and stood just aside from the entrance, in case anyone inside looked through the glass peephole. "No guns," Cameron reminded him. She didn't think he needed to be told again but she was nothing if not thorough.

"I know," he nodded. They needed this to be a quiet job and they didn't have silenced weapons. Shooting would attract attention and bring the cops down on them; they couldn't risk that, not now.

"Ten seconds," Cameron whispered to him, taking position closer to the door and preparing to go first. She knew she was bulletproof, Ellison was not. Her hip touched the wall slightly, not enough to make a sound, but enough to press the cold steel of her sidearm against her. Despite what she'd told Ellison she'd brought a pistol with her in case anything went wrong. She stood directly in front of the door as the ten second time she'd announced to Ellison reached its halfway point. *Five... four... three... two...one...*

With three men inhabiting the apartment the small domicile was uncomfortably crowded. There was only one bedroom and one couch, meaning one of them had had to sleep on the floor at night. The bathroom had never been in good condition since Coleman had bought the place from the landlord, although its one consolation was the hot water in the shower worked like a charm. Even so, with three men regularly using it for all their ablutions the place had started to develop a musky odour that hadn't been there before. The kitchen's trash can was overflowing and needed emptying but one thing Coleman had forgotten was extra black bags.

Opened food cans were stacked neatly on the sink as well as a pile of plates, and steam rose up to the ceiling from the hob, where Pearce stood stirring two saucepans, one full of boiling spaghetti and the other with a red sauce that was supposedly Bolognese, according to the jar it had come from. He awkwardly stirred with a spoon, not knowing how long to keep both pans on for. In the future before he'd been recruited by Skynet he'd survived like any other member of the Resistance; scavenging, stealing and foraging for food. Once he'd made his choice the machines had provided for him and the others, and since coming back in time they'd lived at first on takeout, then after they'd made the fortunes required, had lived in luxury and had people to cook for them, leaving even a simple spaghetti Bolognese a real challenge to him.

As he worked on their meal, Townsend typed away at the computer and Coleman sat next to him with a lit cigarette in his hand, watching as the former worked.

"Just got a reply from Dakara," Townsend said happily. "Looks like the Akagis are as desperate as they were the last time we spoke; they said they're free to meet anytime this week."

"Excellent," Coleman smiled as he stubbed out his cigarette into an ashtray and immediately took out a pack of Lucky Strikes with his good arm, pulled one out and lit it, blowing a puff of smoke out, unintentionally in Townsend's direction.

"Do you have to keep smoking in here?" Townsend snapped irritably. "It's disgusting!"

"It's my apartment," Coleman said, uncaring. "I can smoke in here if I want." His comment earned him a glare from Townsend, who was starting to feel really pissed off at his colleague's habits. In the future he'd briefly worked with Coleman but hadn't really known the man. He'd never met any of the other Greys prior to their being handpicked and assembled for the mission to the past, and after they'd made their money they'd all decided to live separately. Now he wished they could still do so; living with Coleman for even a couple of days was driving him insane. He knew they were all on edge after the attack in the Sierra Crest, which made it all the worse, but still he didn't think he could stand being around the man for much longer.

"Fine," he said through clenched teeth. "Can you at least sit by the window or something?"

Sighing, Coleman got up, making it seem like more of an effort than it was, and went over to the window. He opened it up and let the warm night air inside, as well as the sounds of traffic nearby. His pocket vibrated suddenly and the piano key Nokia tune sounded from within.

"Who's that?" Townsend looked up from the laptop as Coleman's cell phone started ringing. They weren't due to leave to meet with Colonel Schiff for another hour, so it shouldn't be him, he thought. Coleman struggled with his good arm to get the phone out, managed it with some discomfort, and looked down at the illuminated screen as the ringtone beeped out and the phone vibrated in his hand. The caller ID displayed the number but it wasn't one he'd ever seen before.

"I don't know," he said. He pressed to answer and put the phone to his ear. "Hello?" *Nothing.* The call disconnected with no reply.

"Well..." Pearce asked, still stirring the spaghetti that had been on the boil for far too long.

"They hung up," Coleman said.

Townsend turned to him with clear concern on his face. "I thought you said no one knows that number."

"Nobody does," he confirmed nervously. "The only person I've called is Schiff and that wasn't his number."

The hob clanged as Pearce put the saucepan down on the hob. "Are you *sure* nobody else has it?" he asked.

"Of course I am!" Coleman snapped irritably. "I set this place up years ago and I've never once made a call on that phone."

"I don't like it," Townsend grumbled. "Tomorrow we're getting out of here and checking into a hotel until we've hammered out a deal with Dakara." He didn't like how it was going here and he didn't want to spend too long in one place. "Or better yet, leave the country and lie low for a while."

The door exploded open with a loud *crack* and Cameron burst through the entrance to face them, Ellison just behind her. Pearce, Townsend and Coleman stared at her in horror, all of them recognising her as the TOK model reprogrammed by Connor and sent back to protect his younger self; third on their priority target list after John Connor himself and the Zeiracorp AI. They all froze to the spot in fear as she emerged into the apartment, her eyes covered by shades. She positively identified all three Greys from Skynet's records and immediately rushed towards the nearest Grey – Townsend.

" *Fuck!"* he managed to cry out as Cameron punched him in the forehead, shattering his skull beneath the skin and crushing the frontal lobes of his brain, killing him instantly. His body fell to the ground and blood pooled from his eyes and ears, soaking into the

carpet. In the same instant Coleman tried to climb out through the open window and Pearce made a dive for a pistol on the sofa. Ellison rushed to intercept but he was too slow. So was Pearce. Cameron kicked him in the side and sent him flying against the oven he'd been at moments ago, knocking the saucepans off the hob and straight onto him.

Boiling water and spaghetti poured onto his face and he screamed in blinding agony on the floor, kicking wildly and clutching at his devastated features until Cameron picked him up by the throat and crushed his larynx, silencing him. He clawed at his red, burning face, the pain of his burns too much for him to even register the pain from what she'd done to his throat. Blisters already started to form where the skin had boiled loose from the muscle. He screamed silently as she grabbed both sides of his head and snapped it around to the right with a sickening *crunch* as his head neck broke and severed the spinal column.

Coleman used the valuable seconds she'd spent on his two companions to manouevre his leg out over the windowsill in time to see another figure appear from the darkness and shove him back inside. Instinctively he put his hands out to break his fall and the impact on his broken arm sent the two broken, previously realigned halves of the bone smashing against each other, sharp edges tearing through the muscle.

He cried out in pain and grabbed his arm in agony as John emerged through the window from hiding outside on the fire escape. While Cameron and Ellison had taken the front door he'd climbed up the fire escape on the exterior of the building to prevent any escape, and waited for her to confirm their targets' position. He stared down at the Grey in contempt as Coleman tried to back away. "Please..." he struggled to his feet and stared in almost blind fear at John. He barely noticed the warm trickle that ran down the inside his trouser leg and formed a small puddle on the floor. John did, however, and felt nothing more than disgust for the man. He'd done a deal with the

devil and killed the entire world; he'd do the same in a heartbeat just to save his own skin. He deserved what he was going to get.

"Please," the wounded, surrounded Grey raised his hands in surrender. Cameron started towards Coleman, ready to finish him off, but one look from John stopped her in her tracks. He grabbed his quarry from behind, clamped his hand down over the man's mouth to silence him and pulled his head back to expose more of his neck. John pulled out Savannah's knife and plunged the blade slowly into Coleman's throat, sending searing, burning agony tearing through the Grey and causing him to kick and writhe beneath John's grip. His eyes bulged with fear as he struggled against the inevitable. John held the knife in place and twisted it slightly, raking the serrated edges against sinews and nerves and doubling his already excruciating pain.

He'd asked Cameron earlier to show him exactly how to kill a man slowly with a knife, to make him suffer, and despite her telling him they needed to do the job quickly and leave as little trace, she'd told him how to increase pain without making a mess. He'd greedily absorbed the information she'd given him like a sponge and now he put it to good use. He pushed the knife in deeper, cutting though his carotid artery and puncturing his windpipe. He pulled the knife back ever so slightly until the tip came back out of the windpipe and blood flowed out of the nicked artery, down the blade and poured into his windpipe. Coleman coughed and retched as blood flowed down his throat and pooled in his lungs, he struggled as hard as he could to fight back but he was much older than John, accustomed to a cushy life behind a desk; in a physical match there was no contest between the two and with every passing second his strength ebbed away.

Coleman coughed and tried to suck down air but only ended up inhaling more oxygenated blood that frothed inside his lungs and came out his mouth in spurts against the palm of John's hand. His eyes rolled back in his head as he started shaking in John's grasp and clutched weakly at his assailant, fighting hopelessly for life.

"You don't have much time," John said to Coleman, sensing his victim was getting weaker and would probably lose consciousness soon; before that happened he wanted the bastard to hear something important. "So listen to me very carefully. James Ellison, Derek Reese, Kyle Reese, Allison Young, Sergeant Andrew Knowles, Danny Dyson, Charley Dixon... you killed them." There were countless others; everyone in Derek's group who he'd only known for a brief time, and the billions of others who'd suffered and died in the future. They might have prevented it in this timeline but to him, to Cameron and to Savannah it still happened. She'd had her childhood, her family ripped away from her indirectly because of Coleman – if they'd never come back then Weaver's ruse wouldn't have been necessary.

"I'm going to have to see their faces when I close my eyes for the rest of my life," he muttered to the older man. "I watched them die and I have to live with that in my head. I want you to think about that for a moment, for your *last moments.* Think about the people who died, afraid, starving, and screaming, because you only cared about number one.

"I hope it was worth it," John ripped the knife out as hard as he could and tore Coleman's throat out with it. The Grey tried to scream but all that came out was a sickening liquid gurgle. He dropped to the floor and convulsed for several seconds as more and more blood erupted from his wide open neck and now completely severed carotid. The pool of crimson grew wider and wider, too thick to be soaked into the carpet all at once. Finally he stopped convulsing, twitched once, twice, and stopped moving altogether. Mike Coleman, human leader of the Greys and the man behind the Kaliba Group – indirect murderer of untold millions, was dead, and with him the last trace to Skynet.

"Check this out," Ellison held up a clear plastic folder filled with documents. He opened it up and pulled out bank account statements, forged passports, credit cards, technical data, and memory sticks he assumed held more data regarding to Skynet.

"This has got to be the last little bits of Kaliba," he said. He perused some more and found details pertaining to a company called Dakara Systems. Cameron glanced at it, took it out and held it out to John, who took it with bloody hands. He also took the laptop and saw on one of the windows they had up was the CNN website, highlighting an article on the increased tensions between the US and Russia, debating how far it would go.

"Not far," Cameron answered the online question, reading over his shoulder.

"How'd you know that?" Ellison asked.

"I'm working on it," Cameron replied cryptically. Skynet started the crisis between the US and Russia; she determined to end it. She noticed a cell phone on the sofa and picked it up. She unlocked the keypad and scrolled through the small list of contacts, noting Dakara Systems and Colonel Schiff were among them. She selected the latter's number and pressed to call.

"Coleman?" Schiff's voice sounded in the earpiece, sounding slightly distorted by the phone.

"Coleman can't come to the phone right now," she said ominously.

"Jesus... it's you! *What do you want?"*

Cameron saw John looking at her questioningly and she silently mouthed 'Colonel Schiff.' He nodded and left her to it, trusting she knew what she was doing. "You've spoken to Coleman again," she said, adding a slight edge of scorn in her voice very deliberately. "You're trying to resurrect the Skynet project, that's strike one; you won't get another chance." She heard him breathing down the phone and she couldn't be positive but she thought he sounded nervous.

"I don't need one," he shot back at her. *"The Skynet project's a bust; no more AI program, you and the Connors killed it – check the news if you don't believe me."*

Cameron already knew the project had been shelved by the Joint Chiefs but she wanted to make sure it remained that way. Using her ability to peruse the worldwide web at will she'd easily found a great deal of information about Schiff, information she decided to use to her advantage. "How are Dianna and Elizabeth?" She asked him, citing the names of his wife and daughter. "Does Dianna enjoy teaching English at Burbank High School?" She ensured the tone of her voice conveyed her meaning. She knew his family; who they were and what they did, and she could find and get to them whenever she chose.

"Stay away from my family," Schiff snarled. *"If you touch them I'll..."*

"You can't stop me," Cameron interrupted him. "You know what I am, what I can do."

"What do you want?" he asked with a resigned sigh.

"Have you filed your report to your superiors yet?"

"No."

Cameron smiled in satisfaction. "Good. Don't mention me or any other machines in your report; I'll know if you do." She paused for a moment before adding, "I don't want to hurt your family but I'll do whatever it takes to protect mine." She hung up and put the phone in her pocket to dispose of later, then took the folder from Ellison, the laptop from the table, and checked around the apartment for anything else significant. She'd check the contents of the computer just to determine there were no more links to Skynet left. Finding nothing else in the domicile she turned to John. "We should leave," she told him. "Sarah's waiting downstairs." John nodded, put Savannah's bloodied knife back into its sheath on his belt, and followed her and Ellison out of the apartment. He took a moment to close the front door, concealing the carnage within from view of any passers by and running down the stairs to catch up with the other two.

They left the building and turned left, headed for the corner of the block where their Suburban sat idle. John pulled the door open and Sarah immediately looked right to him. Her eyes opened wide and she stared in shock at the sight of his bloodstained shirt.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, unable to look away from the blood and fearing the worst.

"It's not my blood," John replied as he slipped into the front seat. Ellison and Cameron took the seats behind. Sarah breathed out in relief and switched the engine on, pulled out from the kerb and sped up, driving away from the scene.

"We're okay too," Cameron chipped in. Sarah almost rolled her eyes but stopped herself.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said sincerely. She'd made a promise to John she'd try and accept how things had gone between him and Cameron; after all he'd been through he deserved some happiness and although she didn't like it, he seemed to get that from Cameron, and after what John had told her about Cameron allowing Skynet to erase a large part of her to keep him safe, to beat it, she realised she could hardly begrudge them. Did Cameron really love John like he did her, *could she,* even? She knew that to do what John wanted, to try and accept their relationship, she had to give Cameron the benefit of the doubt.

She took the next right and continued north, back to the motel to pick up the two Savannahs. "We need to get out of LA as soon as possible," she said. "The FBI and the police will still be searching for us. We need new IDs and find somewhere to hide."

"No," John straightened up in his seat. He'd had enough of it, and he hadn't done all of this just to have to live under the radar again. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder."

"We shouldn't have to," Ellison agreed. It wasn't right that after all they'd fought for they should still be on the run forever. He and

Savannah – both little and large – could probably live okay; the feds would be all over him like a rash but they had nothing solid against him so eventually they'd leave him alone.

"I can delete all records from the police and FBI database but they'll have files on paper," Cameron said. "We should leave the country."

"They'll be expecting us to cross into Mexico," Sarah disagreed. "And there's no way we'd get through airport security."

"North then," John said. He looked back to Cameron and remembered something she'd said a long time ago. "Canada?"

Cameron smiled, surprised John remembered her recommendation to move to Canada. He hadn't listened to her back then, or he hadn't seemed to be. "It's supposed to be nice this time of year."

This is it, Schiff took a deep, apprehensive breath in and held it as he knocked sharply on the office door in front of him. He clutched tightly onto a white envelope in his hand, his nervous sweat starting to transfer onto the paper.

He'd waited for hours by the LA theatre, stood around awkwardly until midnight, and tried to call Coleman half a dozen times before he'd given up and gone home. He'd wanted answers, to find out the truth behind everything, to find out exactly what these androids were and where they came from. It had been three days since then, and even more phone calls and four emails later he'd still heard nothing. He'd visited Coleman's home but his housekeeper had said she hadn't seen or heard from him in nearly a week. Coleman and the other Kaliba execs had disappeared off the map. None of the people they'd airlifted from the Sierra Crest knew a thing either. He hadn't got his answers, and now he knew he had to face the consequences.

"Come," the expectant voice of his commander, Brigadier- General Remfree, sounded from the other side. Exhaling, Schiff opened the door and passed through the threshold. General Remfree was a small man, thin looking, not the kind of picture that Joe Public imagined when they thought of when they imagined military top brass. Being inside, he had no covering on his head and his shiny, balding pate was in full view; a victim of the unstoppable male pattern baldness.

"Schiff; sit down," he gestured to the chair in front of his desk. Without a word of reply, the colonel did just that. "I've read your report," Remfree started. "Kaliba's AI was wiped out by Sarah and John Connor, the unidentified female brunette accomplice on the news, and a number of other terrorists. That these half dozen or so hacked into the defence net, took control of almost two dozen Reapers and X-45Cs to attack Kaliba's R&D facility while at the same time launched a successful assault on the complex, and then disappeared into the sunset with one of our helicopters. I've gotta say, colonel," he chuckled. "That's a hell of a story."

"It's all true," Schiff said defensively.

"I believe you," Remfree reassured him. "A dozen airmen corroborated your account." He picked up a handful of reports all written by his airmen, testimonies confirming Schiff's story. "In fact, they all said the exact same thing, word for word practically." He was surprised to receive such identical accounts of what happened. Normally there were some discrepancies, but these were so similar it was hard to believe they were written by twelve different people. "You didn't influence their reports in any way, did you? Because it seems to me there's something missing."

Schiff shook his head and looked calmly at Brigadier General Remfree straight in the eye. "No sir," he lied. "I told them to say exactly what happened." He had, however, expressly forbidden the mention of any android or other AI in their reports. The Skynet Project was now public knowledge but the details of it were still classified and he'd taken full advantage of that. He'd briefed the

airmen prior to the mission on a need to know basis, and told them to forget they'd ever seen any android. He only wished he could do the same himself.

"I think it's time for me to retire," Schiff concluded, placing the letter on Remfree's desk. "It's my resignation; I've done twenty-five years, I think it's time I started to take it easy." *Or at least not have to worry about John Connor and his android coming after me anymore.*

"This isn't you trying to duck a possible court martial, is it?" The amount of money and assets lost over this incident; someone had to be held accountable.

"No sir," Schiff said honestly. The thought had crossed his mind briefly; retire now and his pension would remain intact. But in truth he didn't want to look over his shoulder and see long brown hair and glowing blue eyes everywhere he went. He'd resigned himself to the fact he'd probably never find out the truth, so he didn't want to play anymore. He didn't know what was going on but he'd worked out that whatever it was between the Connors, their android, and Kaliba, it was way over his head, and maybe ignorance was bliss.

"Very well, colonel," Remfree nodded. "I'll get the necessary paperwork done and you'll be a civilian before you know it."

"Thank you sir," Schiff stood up and snapped off a sharp salute before turning around and leaving Remfree's office. His life or his career: it was no contest. No, he thought, he wasn't going to tempt fate when it came to that android; he fully believed it could and would carry out its threats to him, without hesitation. No, he thought to himself, having already made up his mind the instant the android had hung up the phone on him. What happened in the Sierra Crest would stay in the Sierra Crest, forever.

Mackenzie, British Columbia

John stirred and smiled as he came to. He hadn't dreamt, or at least he didn't remember it. For him, where every dream was inevitably a nightmare, filled with glowing eyed metal demons come to kill him and everyone he knew, a dreamless sleep was something he appreciated. He knew why, of course: Cameron. She'd stayed in bed with him every night for the past three months, since they'd moved into their new home, and ever since then he hadn't had a single bad dream.

They'd left LA very quickly after taking out Coleman and the other Greys, and driven north, as they'd discussed. They started their new lives in Canada as illegal immigrants, sneaking in without passports, until Cameron had hacked into numerous Canadian government sites and inserted herself, John, Sarah and Future-Savannah into the system, officially making them all Canadian citizens since birth.

Ellison and Little-Savannah had applied for citizenship the honest way and gotten it. He'd taken up the role as her legal guardian and resigned from Zeiracorp, which had gotten back up and running, under new management, whose goals weren't quite as ambitious as Weaver's, and would be Little-Savannah's when she turned eighteen, if she wanted it. A large trust fund set up by the real Catherine Weaver provided her with all the money she'd ever need. Ellison and Little-Savannah lived in a house closer to town while the rest of them lived on the more rural outskirts, enjoying the privacy it offered.

Since then John had been happy for the first time in years; he'd not had to worry about the future, machines, or even the police anymore. He still couldn't help but check out the exits whenever he walked into a new room and found himself looking over his shoulder sometimes, but he hoped he'd get used to being normal someday.

He rolled over and reached for Cameron but his hand touched empty space. He opened his eyes to see that she was gone. His bedroom door was open and Cameron was gone. It didn't take long for him to work out where she'd gone; sounds emanated from the kitchen and the scent of something cooking wafted into his nostrils.

She's making breakfast! Instantly and with a sense of urgency he hadn't had in three months, he shot out of bed, pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, and padded down the hallway, down the stairs and turned into the kitchen to see Cameron at work cooking.

"Sit down," she told him without looking up from what she was doing. John obediently went to the kitchen table and sat down, the legs of his chair scuffing loudly against the floor as he pulled it in. He cleared a space, seeing – and smelling – that she was nearly finished, and pushed a stack of papers and textbooks to one side.

Moments later Cameron came over and placed a large plate in front of him. Bacon, sausage, baked beans, hash browns, eggs, tomatoes, and two pieces of toast, filled the plate almost to the edges, and John's eyes bulged, his stomach rumbled eagerly as he took in the sight and smell of it. Topping it all off was Cameron's coup de grace; a small sirloin steak on the edge of the plate. "What's all this in aid of?" he asked. She'd made him breakfast before but nothing this elaborate.

"I thought you'd prefer it to pancakes," she said.

"I love my cyborg," he grinned as Cameron placed a cup of coffee next to the plate and sat down beside him. They turned towards each other and kissed softly. Cameron pulled away first.

"Eat it before it gets cold," she said. She watched as he picked up his knife and fork and cut into the steak. John put a piece of the meat into his mouth and a burst of flavour immediately hit his taste buds. It was medium rare, pink in the middle but not fleshy, and as he chewed juices from the steak flowed forth from the meat and into his mouth. He didn't know what kind of seasoning she'd put on it but he didn't really care; it was sheer gastronomic bliss.

"You like it," she said with a satisfied smile as she stated the fact. She didn't need to ask him if he approved; his reaction would have been obvious even if she wasn't a cyborg.

"I love it," he said after he swallowed the first piece. He tucked into the rest of the meal, eating slowly and savouring it – something both he and Savannah had started doing after they'd both gotten used to the abundance of food again. Food was something to be enjoyed, to take pleasure in, not just the mandatory refuelling of their bodies or staving off the permanent hunger pangs they'd felt in the future. And when Cameron cooked like this, he reflected, it was very easy to savour and enjoy every morsel.

"What're we doing today?" he asked her with a mouth full of sausage and egg. Without having to hunt for machines and worrying about the end of the world, he found he had a lot more free time on his hands now.

"Studying," Cameron reached across the far end of the table and picked up several notebooks and textbooks. "English, chemistry and history."

"Great," John murmured, sounding less enthusiastic than he really was. It had been his choice and deep down he knew he'd made the right one. After everything he'd gone through after his birthday, after living in the future for three months to find Cameron and fighting to prevent the end of the world, he'd started to think about his future – his *new future.* He didn't want to squander it. But at the same time, after all that, going back to high school seemed pointless. He was never very good at making friends, never went to dances or joined afterschool clubs. He'd never fit it there, he'd always be the loner weirdo. Still, with Cameron's help he was ahead of schedule with his work and the assignments he'd done at home and sent off so far had been returned with solid A-grades.

Misreading John, Cameron took his murmuring as a sign he perhaps regretted his decision to take up home schooling. "I could forge your certificates like I did for Savannah," she offered.

John shook his head. "No, I want to do this properly. And you've already done enough forgery to last us a while," he said. Some online tampering had resulted in Canadian passports and birth

certificates, driver's licenses for him, herself and for Sarah, as well as bank accounts that wouldn't go short of cash anytime soon. Cameron had refused to issue Savannah with a forged license however, and told her she'd have to take lessons, for her own safety.

"More than you think," Cameron said as she took yesterday's newspaper from the far edge of the table and placed it on the other side of John's plate. She opened it to a page displaying a photo of Obama and Medvedev shaking hands and signing a document. He skimmed over the headline and the first few lines of text enough to see it was an article regarding them signing an agreement to limit the number of nuclear weapons each country possessed.

The tensions between the US and Russia had abated, fizzled out almost as quickly as they'd started, with a large payment from the US Treasury to the Russian Federation and the families of the deceased and wounded sailors, followed by a humbled apology. Both had been completely out of the blue amid all the grandstanding and refusals to apologise – which John figured was justified as neither side was really at fault.

"Did you have something to do with this?" John asked, cocking an eyebrow suspiciously. Cameron had done some serious hacking in the past and it wasn't long after they'd killed Coleman that all the talk of conflict had died down without further incident. In the photo he saw Obama hiding a look of strain; the man didn't appear very comfortable at all in the picture.

"Obama didn't make the apology or pay any compensation," she admitted.

"You did," John realised, more forgery on her part. He looked at the photo of the ill at ease president and couldn't help but shake his head and chuckle. *She'd said* she'd sort it out. "No wonder he doesn't look happy."

She heard noise from outside and in microseconds she identified the source of it. Two people approaching the house. "Eat quickly," she

warned him. "They're coming."

Too late, the back door opened up loudly and Savannah burst through into the kitchen, clad in running shoes, shorts and shirt and sweating profusely. Her face was bright red and she panted hard, sucking in as much air as she could. Moments later Sarah appeared, dressed much the same and looking even more exhausted than Savannah.

"How was the run?" Cameron asked them.

"Bad," Sarah gasped. She went to one of the cupboards, took a glass out and filled it up with water from the faucet. She gulped half of it down in one and splashed the rest on her face, which was so red that John half expected the water to hiss and evaporate into steam.

"Savannah kicked your ass again?" John smirked.

"She's a freak," Sarah panted as she refilled her glass again. "She just doesn't get tired."

Savannah shrugged noncommittally. "You're just old," she said, recalling how she'd said something similar to Knowles on the mountain plateau. She nimbly ducked a wet dishcloth that flew at her a moment later and missed her by an inch, instead hitting the refrigerator.

"No more age jokes," she said, pointing a finger at Savannah.

"She's got a point, mom," John said. "Savannah's ten years younger and she's from the future." She was used to pushing herself past normal limits of her endurance; running for her life was the norm for her so it was no big thing for her to go all out she was running for sport. John knew his mother had always been obsessive about keeping fighting fit and she'd worked out relentlessly almost every day for as long as he could remember, but Savannah was something else.

"I *will* beat you one day," Sarah said to Savannah. Once they'd set themselves up in Mackenzie, Savannah had – with her miniature self's help – fulfilled her promise to her Ellison and started to make a life for herself. She'd put in an application to join the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and weeks later, barely five minutes after the plaster casts had been removed from her arm and leg, had she started training to get fit again. She'd taken up running with Sarah almost every morning and it had quickly turned into a daily competition, at least in Sarah's eyes it was.

"If you say so," Savannah shrugged. Sarah had come close a few times but close was no cigar. No matter who won she found it a good workout and their contests had been part of the reason that only a few weeks ago she'd outrun all the other candidates on the RCMP fitness tests, putting even one of the instructors to shame.

Savannah raided the fridge and opened up a carton of orange juice, not bothering with a glass and gulping it straight down. Sarah had gotten used to that when Derek was with them so it didn't really bother her too much that Savannah had no table manners either. She turned her attention to John as he happily munched on his oversized breakfast.

"What are you doing up so early, anyway?" she asked her son. John's mouth was full so he simply pointed to his breakfast.

"I see," she said warily. Cameron indulged him a bit too much sometimes, she thought. What made it worse was that, although she'd never say it aloud, Sarah had to privately admit that Cameron was a better cook. John never said anything about her cooking but she'd noticed how his face lit up when Cameron said she was making dinner. Still, she thought, *at least there's one worse cook than me.* Savannah had tried a few times and nearly burnt the house down; so Sarah could take solace in the fact that even though she feared she might never outrun the future survivor, she was still the best *human* cook in the house.

"I'm gonna grab a shower and head to work," she said, heading out of the kitchen and out of their sight.

"You have a letter," Cameron said to Savannah and handed her an envelope. "The mail arrived when you were running."

Savannah took it from her and tore it open. She pulled the note out and read quickly, her eyes darting from left to right across the page and a smile spreading across her lips as she did. "It's from the Mounted Police: I got in," she said happily. "I start training at the end of the month."

"Congratulations," Cameron said. She liked Savannah and was glad she was happy, knowing the loss she'd suffered in the future. She'd of course overheard the conversation between Ellison and Savannah the night they'd infiltrated Serrano Point and knew they'd discussed her future. She knew Savannah sometimes still went off alone to grieve and think about him. Succeeding in fulfilling her promise to Ellison would help her cope with the loss.

"Who'd have thought we'd have a cop living with 'terrorists'?" John said ironically. If anyone had said it before he'd have laughed himself half to death.

"Nobody would look for us in a police officer's house," Cameron added. It was unlikely anyone would ever find them after all her creative forgeries but Savannah's choice of career did offer some extra benefits to them. If someone figured out who they were she might be able to give them advanced warning.

"We should do something to celebrate," John said. "How about we all go out for dinner tonight? We'll get Ellison and your twin out, too." *That is* - he thought - *if I'll even be hungry by then.* He was barely halfway through the breakfast Cameron had made him, it was so big it could probably last him the whole day.

Savannah nodded her approval as she approached the table. "Good idea," she replied. "But until then..." with lightning quickness she shot

out a hand and swiped a sausage from John's plate, and ate it in two bites before he could react.

"Hey!" protested John. He held his fork up defensively to fend off any other attacks on his breakfast.

"Old habit," she shrugged. It wasn't the first time she'd had to steal food in her life; the Mexican soldiers she'd shacked up with hadn't fed her much and when the moonshine and the drugs had worn off and she'd sobered up enough to feel hungry she'd been forced to swipe their rations. The first attempts had earned her a few black eyes and bloodied noses until she'd learnt how to do it without being caught.

John looked to Cameron and saw she was simply watching with a hint of amusement on her face. He turned his attention back to what was left of the steak and quickly finished it off before she could even think about having any; it was just too good to share. Once he'd polished off the slab of juicy meat he pushed the plate away, still half full of beans, egg and half a slice of toast. "Finish it off if you like," he offered to Savannah as he got up from the table.

"You're not hungry?" Cameron asked him. He'd never left any of her food behind before. In fact, she recalled every meal he'd eaten in her presence – which was almost every meal he'd eaten, period – since arriving in 2009, and he'd never failed to eat everything on the plate, in the first weeks he'd even licked the plate clean of sauce or gravy. She touched his forehead with her fingertips and scanned him to make sure he wasn't ill.

"I'm good," he said.

"You sure?" Savannah asked, sitting down where he'd just been.

"Go ahead," John told her. Barely had the words gotten out of his mouth when she attacked the breakfast with the same ferocity he'd seen from her, and that he'd shared, during their first meal in the safe house. He'd gotten used to having food in abundance again

whereas a lifetime of being hungry had had its effect on Savannah and she still sometimes gorged until she felt ill.

"You should join up with me," Savannah said to Cameron, between mouthfuls of food. "Give you something else to do."

"John keeps me busy," she replied. She understood Savannah meant it as more than simply something to keep her occupied but as an offer to keep her company. Neither of them had any other friends. She saw Savannah's face fall slightly as she declined the offer. "If you need a running partner who can keep up with you, I'll join you in the mornings," she added. "I run faster than Sarah."

"And every other human who ever lived," John added. He had a feeling that Cameron would drag him into these runs quite quickly. He wouldn't mind that apart from the fact he'd just seen Savannah kick his mom's ass and the thought of running against her – as well as Cameron – was pretty daunting. Not to mention the fact that even if he could beat his mother he wasn't sure if he'd dare do so.

"Tomorrow morning," Cameron offered Savannah. Seven a.m.; John will come too."

"I'll hold you to it," the redhead said, pointing at them both with her fork. She hadn't really expected Cameron to take it up but she'd wanted to offer, both to have a friend with her and to give Cameron some variety in her life.

Leaving Savannah to finish off his breakfast, John led Cameron to the living room before they signed him up for any more training sessions that might actually kill him, and sat down on the sofa – and for the first time in years it wasn't lined with Kevlar inside it. Cameron sat down beside him and leaned back, having learnt that the others preferred it when she sat like they did and not bolt upright.

John sank into the sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table in front of them. He leaned a little to his side, into Cameron, and she reciprocated the motion, resting the side of her head against his.

Neither of them reacted to the sound of Sarah coming down the staircase. Her hair was still damp from the shower and she wore a pale blue uniform similar to many she'd worn in the past. She put a piece of paper on the table, beside John's feet.

"Shopping list," she said to him and handed him fifty dollars with it. She still didn't like to use cards if she could help it; a force of habit she reckoned she might never break out of. "Get something for dinner tonight."

"We're going out for dinner tonight," Cameron told her. "We all are: Savannah's been accepted into the Mounted Police."

"Fair enough," Sarah shrugged. She knew she didn't sound overjoyed for Savannah but then she was hardly surprised the young woman had been accepted. She looked to Cameron. "Keep him out of trouble – and no funny business *."*

"Funny business?" Cameron asked as John swallowed nervously and started to turn slightly red, wishing Cameron hadn't asked a follow up question.

His discomfort wasn't lost on Sarah in the least and inside she grinned evilly. "No hiding the sausage, jumping each others' bones, swinging from the chandeliers..."

"God, mom," John groaned, turning beet red and pretty sure he was going to die of embarrassment any minute. He really didn't want to have this talk with his mother.

The former mother of the future smirked at the sight of her son squirming. She knew she couldn't stop them and she wasn't going to try. She didn't like it that John and Cameron had fallen for each other so completely but she was getting used to it, learning to live with it. And to their credit she hadn't heard or seen anything physical between them since the safe house – though she knew it still happened. But that didn't mean she couldn't have a little fun at his expense, she grinned. Cameron simply stared at her as if she'd gone

mad. She didn't get it, Sarah realised. *"No sex* while I'm out *,"* she elaborated, making it abundantly clear for the cyborg.

Cameron saw Sarah was enjoying embarrassing John and decided two could play. "Would you prefer we have sex when you're here?" she asked, deliberately misinterpreting what she'd said.

"I... *no..."* Sarah found herself completely dumbstruck by Cameron's question. What the hell kind of thing was that to ask? She had no idea how to even answer that, and finally settled for "I'm off to work," deciding she didn't want to carry on this discussion.

"Check mate," Cameron winked at John. "Have fun," she politely said to Sarah.

"Oh, I'm sure I will," Sarah rolled her eyes as she made her way to the front door. She'd taken on a part time waitressing job to get her out of the house and give her something to do. Savannah would soon be the most hard-assed cop British Columbia would ever see, John was studying with Cameron's help, and she'd wanted something to do and waitressing was what she knew. It'd do for now, she thought. She disappeared out the front door and John and Cameron listened as her car switched on and pulled out of the driveway.

After a moment John wrapped his arm around Cameron and they nestled closer to each other. The TV was off and they sat there, not saying a word, in comfortable silence, just content to be in one another's company. His thoughts drifted to what Savannah had said, and unknowingly, to what Sarah had been considering too. "Have you thought about what you want to do?" he'd never asked her before but now he wondered. "You don't have to be around me twenty-four-seven."

Cameron turned to look at him, confused. "You want me to leave you alone?" she asked. He'd wanted that in the past but since following her to the future he'd been uncomfortable away from her, a feeling she fully reciprocated.

"No," John shook his head, realising he'd worded it wrong and afraid he'd upset her. He tried to explain it better. "What I mean is; Skynet's gone now, there's no mission. Mom's got a job, I'm studying, Savannah's about to become the Canadian Judge Dredd; if there's anything you'd like to do with your life I want you to do it."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Well, you're turning out to be an amazing cook; have you thought about doing that for a living?"

Cameron looked at him strangely. "You want me to be a chef?"

"Only if you want to," John replied. "I want you to be happy; if there's something you want to do, I want you to do it."

She leaned back into him and nodded deliberately so he could feel it, silently telling him she understood his meaning. "I want to be with you," she said simply. She'd told him before because she was a machine she couldn't be happy. Now she knew that wasn't accurate. She was satisfied and content when she was with John. That was what she wanted, *all* she wanted.

John turned his face towards her, leaned forward and closed his eyes as he lightly kissed her. He sighed contentedly, feeling her smile against his lips as she returned the kiss. He didn't need to say he loved her, nor she to him; it wasn't required to say it in words, though he often did to her and vice versa. "I want that too," he murmured back against her lips. They'd beaten Skynet together, fought the future and won, and now they had a new one to look forward to. He felt strange, not having a destiny, a fate mapped out for him anymore, but it felt good. He was free now; free to do whatever he wanted with his life. They had a whole lifetime to figure out what to do with themselves; no matter what he did with his life or she hers, they now had a bright, shining future to look forward to together.

That's all folks!

Hope you enjoyed it, I certainly enjoyed writing it. Thanks to everyone who's read and given feedback, it's been great to get your opinions and I'm glad the story seems to be so popular. I'd like to give particular thanks to Kaotic2 for beta reading and listening to me go on and on over the past few months!

I do have another idea for an unrelated TSCC fic, though for now I'm going to take a break from writing for a little bit as I went from finishing Century almost straight into working on this fic, so I think a rest is due. Please do let me know your thoughts on this final chapter and the fic as a whole!